TAPPEI
NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY
SHINICHIROU
OTSUKA
22
Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-

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-Starting Life in Another World-

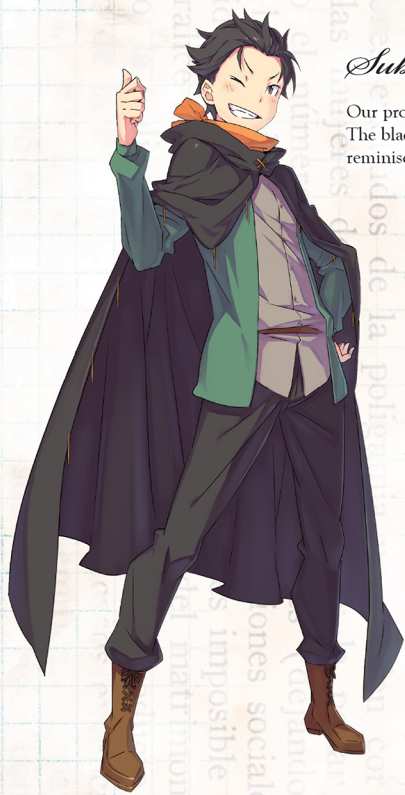
The white space surrounding them disappeared and was replaced by countless shelves of books extending all the way to the ceiling.
Seeing a name that he recognized, Subaru casually picked one up.
The moment he opened the book to look inside—It hit.
—He blacked out.

"...Ngh! W-wait!"
Sensing that something was definitely not adding up, Subaru frantically chased after the bird, which was getting farther and farther away.
"...Natsuki?"
Hearing Subaru's hoarse murmur, someone with light purple hair fluttering in the breeze turned toward him.

Characters

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.



Subaru

Our protagonist in his desert attire. The black cloak and orange scarf are reminiscent of his track jacket.

Shaula

The Star Guardian of the Pleiades Watchtower.
Calls Subaru "Master."

Reid Astrea

The first Sword Saint and one of the three great heroes who saved the world.
It is said that the Astrea family and the Sword Saint lineage began with him.

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Old Memories

Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-

VOLUME 22

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION: SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

YEN ON
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TAPPEI NAGATSUKI

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CHAPTER 1

THE GREAT PLEIADES LIBRARY

1

After achieving a costly victory over the Witch Cult in the Water Gate City, Subaru Natsuki and company set out for the Auguria Dunes, a dangerous and foreboding land that lay along Lugunica's distant eastern border.

Home to countless demon beasts, it was an impassable sea of sand that repelled all who attempted to pass, including the Sword Saint, Reinhard. Their party endured mighty sandstorms and ferocious beasts that barred their way before finally reaching their destination—the Pleiades Watchtower, where they would find the great Sage Shaula, who was said to be all-knowing.

Everything they did was for the sake of the people waiting to be saved back in Pristella. This was a desperate bid to reclaim the things they'd lost: memories, names, and even bodies…

"After everything we went through, why are you looking at me like that?! Are you saying I'm somehow the bad guy here?! I'm innocent! Innocent, I tell you!"

"Do not betray our expectations like this. Please, Subaru."

"Just when I was thinking he might have some redeeming qualities. In the end, Barusu is just Barusu."

The party's vital mission had brought them to this tower, which was now being filled by the echoes of Subaru's shouts. His desperate pleas went unheeded, and his comrades gave him nothing but cold gazes and sharp barbs.

Subaru had slept for two days straight after everyone had been reunited. They had been concerned about his safety and naturally

hurried to his side after hearing he had regained consciousness, only to discover him pinned underneath a half naked woman. It was not at all surprising that whatever relief they felt was overshadowed by disappointment or even scorn.

Julius's and Ram's cold gazes were entirely reasonable.

"Will you let go of me already…?! What's with your crazy grip?!"

"Not! Gonna! Happen!"

Beneath their scornful glares, Subaru himself was desperately trying to escape the embrace of the scantily-clad woman—Shaula, if he had to guess—clinging to his arm. It wasn't very good manners to act this way toward the Sage they had been wanting to meet so badly, but she had already disregarded all standards of courtesy, so he had no intention of holding back.

"I can't get her off…! Don't just stand there—someone, help me!"

"You have a lewd look on your face, Pervarusu."

"No, I don't, and don't change my name like that! That hurts, Emilia-tan! Pulling my hair isn't going to help much!"

"Ah, sorry. I wasn't trying to help."

"That's what you're apologizing for?!"

Shaula stubbornly refused to let go of Subaru's arm, and Emilia was pulling at his hair with a dreadfully cold look on her face. Meanwhile, Beatrice was red-faced, and her eyes were spinning, mainly because she had also fallen into Shaula's clutches.

"Aaaaanyway! Everyone just calm down! Me included! Let's talk it out!"

2

At Subaru's groggy request to bring the situation under control, everyone decided to cooperate. For the moment, at least.

They sat in a circle, which was conducive to civil conversation. However, Shaula was still refusing to release Subaru's arm, and she insisted on rubbing her cheek against his while sitting next to him.

"Mmm, Master! Master!"

"How obscene."

"You saw that catastrophe earlier, right? Does it look to you like I want my right arm locked up like this? Can't you hear the bones creaking? I'm going to lose my arm to lack of blood flow at

this rate."

In response to Ram's scornful gaze, Subaru looked at his limb that had been offered up as a sacrifice. A gorgeous, half naked woman was wrapped around it.

While this might have seemed like an envious situation at first glance, the very noticeable pain from his groaning joints and bones made it impossible to enjoy any sensations he'd usually feel with her voluptuous body pressing against him.

"Anyway, I'd like to move this along before I lose an arm here… But first of all, I'm glad everyone is safe. Anastasia, Meili—it's a relief to see you safe, too."

"I'm glad you woke up, Natsuki. I was starting to worry you might not. I would have a felt a little bit guilty if that happened."

"Hearing you say that almost sounds like you're jinxing it, but I guess there was a chance that's how it would've turned out, huh…? Did you worry about me, too, Meili?"

Addressing the two late arrivals, Anastasia expressed polite relief while Meili looked away completely.

"Me? Worry about you? Spare me. I wouldn't want Petra or Beatrice to set me in their sights."

"What do you mean?! Beako and Petra aren't that petty! Right?"

Beatrice was sitting on his lap after being freed from her helpless state earlier. Her puffed-up face deflated when he poked her perky red cheeks.

"Of course not. Betty is not so fickle that something so minor would be a bother. Meili can worry about Subaru all she likes, so long as she knows her place."

"See, listen to Beako. Feel free to worry about me as much as you want!"

"Did your heads stop working because you were separated for so long?"

"How dare you!"

Anger colored Beatrice's face when Meili quipped back with the polar opposite of a warm response.

Setting aside their endearing banter, Subaru looked around the circle. Everyone was safe.

However—

"You needn't worry. Everyone is present and accounted for. Of course, your concern is natural. Rest assured, I will take you to see

her and your dragon once we are done."

"Could you not read my min—? No, sorry. Thanks for worrying about me."

Guessing the meaning in Subaru's gaze, Julius answered before he could even ask a question. Nodding, Subaru gestured to the carriage and land dragon behind him that had survived the party's adventure in the sands.

"Thanks. I knew Joseph was safe, but I didn't see Patlash… And Rem wasn't in the carriage, either. Where are they?"

"Upstairs. I'll explain more later, but for now… She is undergoing treatment."

Hearing that unexpected response from Julius, Subaru instinctively focused on a certain detail.

"Treatment?! You mean Rem?! So she can be treated… Does that mean she'll finally wake up?!"

"Calm down, Barusu. You're jumping to conclusions."

"…Oh…"

As soon as Subaru started leaning forward, Ram's words hit him like a splash of cold water. Catching his breath under her sharp gaze, he sat back down.

"…Sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"Um, Subaru. When we found all of you, Patlash was badly hurt, so she's being healed upstairs at the moment. And Rem is in the same room…"

"…Ah, yeah, I get it. It's okay, Emilia, thanks. And you don't have to worry, Julius. I was just getting ahead of myself."

Taking a deep breath, Subaru regretted jumping to conclusions. After taking a moment to banish the slightly darkened mood, he looked up.

They were in a terrifically large cylindrical space that seemed to extend upward without end. There was a giant spiral staircase hugging the interior wall of the tower that was apparently the main way to move about. It was set up so that it was impossible to reach the top floor without using those several thousand yards of stairs.

"Just to confirm… Rem and Patlash are up there, right?"

"And I'll take you to where they are after this. I'm sure you'll be more able to relax once you actually see them. Everyone was terrified after what happened this time."

"Frantically running around under sniper fire only to have the sky shatter around us and then that…"

Thinking back on what happened after they had been separated, Subaru and Julius exchanged grimaces. Sitting on Subaru's left, Emilia nodded, too.

"Yes, we were shocked when we were swallowed up by the crack in the sky… But it was *reeeally* worrying having so many people who couldn't fight get separated from us."

"Big Sister was really, really panicked. Beatrice was bawling her eyes out, and I got worked up, too."

"Ah, there you go fibbing again, Meili. It's true that I was panicking, but Beatrice wasn't bawling her eyes out. She was just on the verge of it, right?"

"If you're going to try to be considerate, at least follow through…!"

"?"

Beatrice pouted when it was casually revealed that she had been close to tears, but Emilia didn't understand why she was upset. Their endearing exchange brought a smile to Subaru's lips as he shrugged at Julius.

"So you must have also been pretty scared, huh? It's a damn shame I didn't get to see it."

"Of course, I was quite shaken. Unlike you, Lady Anastasia and Ms. Ram are delicate women. I was ashen, unable to find them no matter where I looked. Even at this very moment, it's a relief to see them."

"You were just panicking and scared, so why does it sound so elegant when you say it?"

Julius answered while touching his hair, as was his habit, which drew a heavy frown from Subaru. Still, it was a good thing that everyone seemed back to their usual selves.

All that was left was—

"What? Please stop directing your unpleasant gaze at me."

Ram sat across from him with her usual flat expression and shot a sharp barb at Subaru when she noticed him looking at her.

Porcelain skin and pink eyes. A well-proportioned and refreshingly beautiful face. A visage like a tantalizing fruit, resting somewhere between cute and refined. From any angle, it was the usual Ram.

"This is a waste of time."

"I didn't even say anything yet! I was just thinking it was nice we're both safe and sound. You know, after everything that

happened down there? …I still remember you covering me at the end.”

“And that was a wasted effort.”

“I’m saying thank you!”

The image that flashed through his head was from the moments right before he passed out—Ram battered and bruised, standing in that grotesque monster’s path, trying to protect Subaru.

The slender figure covered in wounds bravely facing down a powerful enemy with no hope of victory. Her gallant demeanor was inspiring, but he couldn’t ignore the fear of loss that it had evoked, either.

“See, this is why there’s no point in thanking you, Big Sis…”

“It’s okay, Subaru. Ram is just a little embarrassed is all. I’m sure she’s just feeling awkward since you were hugging her when she woke up. It was cute.”

“Lady Emilia!”

Hearing Emilia’s giggle, Ram reacted vehemently, but that wasn’t enough to erase what Emilia had just said. Thinking a bit more deeply about it—

“Oh yeah, when I woke up, there was an odd space where I was lying… I had assumed it was Beako, but—”

“Forget it.”

As he recalled the moment, Ram’s voice grew colder than usual.

“But…”

“I. Said. Forget it.”

“O-okay, okay. Forgetting it. There, it’s gone now.”

“That will suffice. You would do well to be careful, too, blockhead… I mean, Lady Emilia.”

“Blockhead? How did you mix that up with my name? They don’t sound anything alike…”

Emilia cocked her head, but Ram feigned ignorance, declaring the conversation over.

It appeared that Ram had no desire to discuss what happened underground. In order to continue, the natural choice was to turn to the other person who had been down there with them.

“Since Ram’s not really answering, do you remember anything, Anastasia?”

“Oh, I’m part of this conversation, too? I thought you had forgotten about me.”

“Sorry for prioritizing our crew. So what happened? I was still

vaguely conscious when that demon beast was blown away, but…”

“After that, I was terrified in the pitch dark. And with you and Ram both down, I was the only one who could negotiate with that Sage over there.”

“The Sage… You mean her?”

Hearing that, Subaru pointed at the woman still clinging to his right arm, Shaula, whom he had been deliberately ignoring.

“I can’t really imagine her doing anything dignified enough to justify calling it negotiation.”

“That’s a delicate way to put it. But it’s bewildering to me, too. No matter how much I pushed and pulled, she barely spoke a word. Now she’s gaga over you.”

“She wouldn’t talk? This thing here?”

“Argh! You keep doing that… Master, I’m Shaula, not ‘this thing’!”

Shaula glared up at Subaru in a huff.

Long eyelashes, well-proportioned face, a great body that left little to the imagination—she possessed all the hallmarks of beauty, and under other circumstances, having her leaning against him would be nothing less than a triumph.

“Having someone come full throttle at you when your affection gauge is at zero just feels weird as hell, even if they are hot…”

“! You called me hot just now, didn’t you?!”

“It must be convenient having ears that only hear what you like.”

Shaula’s eyes gleamed as she pressed even closer while Subaru tried in vain to peel her off. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t escape her monstrous strength. In the end, Subaru sighed as he gave up on recovering control of his arm.

“It is what it is, I guess. My arm’s a lost cause, so let’s focus on the topic at hand. Hey you, use your words and talk.”

“Sure, of course! If that’s what Master wants.”

“I see. It’s helpful that you are being cooperative. If you don’t mind, I’d like to ask if it’s safe to assume that you’re the Sage who took up residence in the Pleiades Watchtower?”

“Bleh.”

“Answer him properly! You literally just said you’d talk!”

Right when she seemed willing to respond with an easygoing smile, Shaula blatantly ignored Julius’s question. And when Subaru pressed her, she puffed out her cheeks in annoyance.

“Whaaat? You’re the one who said, ‘If anyone asks you anything, don’t say anything unnecessary, don’t talk to them, and don’t tell them anything. Just stab them.’ I’m doing what you told me to!”

“Your master’s pretty outrageous.”

“Yeeep. You’re super outrageous, Master. I demand a sincere apology and some serious self-reflection.”

Even as she said that, Shaula rubbed her head against Subaru’s neck in a show of puppy-like attachment. Subaru ignored it and flicked her forehead.

“That hurt…or not, but that’s abuse! Abuse, I say! You assaulted me! I’ll see you in court!”

“Where’d you even learn that phrase? …Anyway, talk to them, too, not just me. If you’re going to treat me like your master, then listen to me, please.”

“…Really? Can I?”

“? Sure. If anything, I’d prefer if you did. I want to get on with this discussion already.”

A blank, stunned look crossed Shaula’s face. Then her expression gradually went from shock to understanding to acceptance and then to deeply moved—

“Wooooo! I finally got permission! I don’t have to keep trying to convince people that I’m a profound, mysterious beauty character anymore! Woo-hoo!”

“You weren’t doing any of that to begin with!”

Shaula grinned as she got excited. Her ponytail was swinging wildly, slapping Subaru in the face. Blocking it with his left hand, Subaru continued by asking, “Anyway, *are* you the rumored Sage?”

That question cut straight to the crux of why they had come to the Pleiades Watchtower in the first place.

Shaula’s face scrunched up like she had bitten something sour.

“Um, it’s kinda hard to answer that.”

“Hard? Why?”

“If you’re looking for Shaula, then yep that’s me, the one who loves Master the most. But if you’re looking for Sage Shaula, then I’m not so sure.”

A frown appeared as she finally started to actually respond to questions. But there was something disquieting about her first answer.

It was a distinct lack of familiarity with being called the Sage.

In other words…

"If I may, Lady Shaula."

Likely noticing the same problem, Julius raised his hand.

"'Lady?' You're making me blush. I'm not used to titles like that. Just say my name. Lady Shaula is just… Geh-heh."

"Very well, then at your discretion, Ms. Shaula— To this day, the achievements of Sage Shaula have been passed down through the generations by countless people. Is it correct to say that these legends refer to you?"

"Weeell, it's hard to say. I haven't left this tower in foreeever. Maybe the stories spread in a weird way? Must have if they're calling me, of all people, a sage."

Shaula cocked her head as she put a finger to her mouth.

"Ah, unless Master named someone else Shaula, too. If that other Shaula did something really awesome, then maybe it's not so weird after all… Did you do that, Master?"

"Don't go asking me. Those are false charges, no matter how you cut it."

"Doesn't look like Master can think of anyone, so I guess I really am the only one named Shaula. It's the name Master gave me, my name and my name only… Who needs another Shaula anyway."

"I see. So a troublemaker was spreading falsehoods."

"Don't look at me while saying that! These are false charges! I'm innocent until proven guilty!"

Setting aside the farce currently going on, Shaula didn't sound like she was lying. Worst-case scenario, that meant the stories that had been passed down through the years might have been wrong.

While listening to their back-and-forth, Anastasia started fishing around in her oversize purse and pulled out a coin.

"Checking your books all of a sudden? Or not, from the looks of it…"

"Well, it is a hobby of mine, and hearing coins jangle is great for helping me brainstorm… But this is something else. See, you can tell if you look closely at a Kingdom coin."

Anastasia tossed the coins in her hand over to Subaru. Startled, he managed to catch them and saw four coins: copper, silver, gold, and sacred gold.

"I'm sure you're not trying to bribe Shaula, but…"

"If that would work, I wouldn't be against it, but no. Just look at them. There are images on the coins, right? There's no separating

money and history. Every country worthy of the name has its legacy etched in its coins."

Taking her words to heart, Subaru checked the image on the coins. There had never really been a reason to examine them that closely before, but now that he looked, there were different images on all four of them.

"The sacred gold one is the Holy Dragon, the gold is the first Sword Saint, the silver is the Sage, and the copper is Lugunica Castle. You didn't know?"

"Eh? Now Emilia-tan's whipping out NPC exposition…!"

"But this is common sense. Did you not pay any attention when you went out shopping?"

Subaru whistled in an attempt to slip past Emilia's painful follow-up. It was true—the markings on the coins were exactly as she had described. There was a dragon on the sacred gold coin, a man with intense eyes on the gold, and the castle on the copper. And on the silver—

"A young, handsome sort of guy. I guess maybe it vaguely resembles Shaula but also not really."

"However, as far as the world is concerned, Shaula is the person on that coin."

The coin's image was a handsome guy with long hair and a masculine face. Naturally, no matter the angle, it wasn't someone who could be mistaken for a beautiful, half naked woman.

"Heh, that's pretty good. It looks just like Master." Peering at the silver coin from the side, Shaula unleashed a terrible insult without a hint of malice.

"What part?! Ah, wait, if the Sage there is supposed to be your master, then does that match the Master in your memories?"

"Argh, what are you talking about? You're my only Master."

"Then I have to ask again: What part?!"

She seemed unhappy with his annoyed reaction.

"Ehhh? As far as I can tell, there's a lot of matching features. It has hair, two eyes and ears, a mouth, and a nose."

"Is that it?! If that's the level we're operating on, then a Mr. Potato Head is just as similar!"

"Even I wouldn't really say the person on the coin resembles Subaru…"

It was a kindergarten level of distinction. Subaru and Emilia found it unbelievable. It was the sort of comparison that made

everyone other than Shaula grimace a bit.

"Bleh. I mean, look, I'm not great with faces. I can more or less tell the difference between a guy or girl, but everything else is basically all the same, right? …Well, I guess I can tell people apart by size."

"The nerve to add that right after looking at Betty."

"Your smallness and cuteness are part of what makes you unique, so it's fine. More importantly, if that's how unreliable your eyes are, where do you get off saying I'm your master! You've clearly got the wrong guy!"

Taking advantage of Shaula's excuse, Subaru leaped at the chance to clear his name. Unfortunately, this didn't lead where he was hoping it would.

"Ah, no problemo there. That has nothing to do with how you look."

"Oh really? Then how exactly can you tell? Auras?"

"Smell. No one but Master would ever give off such a nose-scorching, pitch-black, nasty stench and be totally fine."

"I've never been more insulted! Do I really smell that bad?!"

When he heard the word smell, he had braced himself, but that resolve was dust in the wind when Shaula hit him with an unthinkable selection of words.

"Why are you mad? Ah, is it 'cause I called it nasty? Don't worry! Your smell is downright atrocious, but it isn't, like, vomit-inducing. More like a weird combination that makes you want to smell it again!"

"A girl shouldn't say something like that! And if that was supposed to make me feel better, you did a terrible job!"

Subaru covered his face to hide his shame and collapsed in tears on the spot.

"What the hell…? I thought I had gotten used to hearing it by now, but that was too much. What did I do to deserve this…?"

"I-it's okay, Subaru. I understand. Why don't we give you a proper bath later?"

"You don't get it at all!"

While Subaru bawled, Emilia tried to reassure him, only for Ram to cut in, annoyed by the whole situation.

"In any case, if Barusu's permission is enough to convince you, then answer our questions. You are Shaula but not the Sage. In that case, do you know a Sword Saint or Holy Dragon?"

“Sword Saint? Holy Dragon?”

“Their names are Reid and Volcanica.”

“Ugh.”

Hearing that, Shaula’s face twisted up like she had eaten something disgusting.

“You know them?”

“Of course I do. I’ve known stick-swinging Reid and sarcastic Volcanica since way back in the day. Haven’t seen them in forever since we split up, though. They still doing all right?”

“Reid’s long dead now.”

“Really?! He’s dead?! That guy always seemed like he wouldn’t die even if you killed him! How’d he die?! Eating something weird he picked up off the ground or something?!”

“Old age. There’s no one who can fight that.”

“Old age… Ohhh, right. Yeah. Reid was technically human, wasn’t he?”

Shaula looked down sadly at hearing an old friend had died. Even her ponytail seemed to lose its energy, and she looked lonely as her shoulders slumped.

“Then what about Volcanica?”

“Volcanica’s a dragon, so yeah.”

“I see. It would have been better if Volcanica died instead of Reid, though.”

“You’ve got a mouth on you, damn.”

But that air of loneliness was fleeting, and she quickly changed gears, tearing into her other old friend without reservation.

And while Shaula seemed almost refreshed after that, Ram had a pensive look on her face as she closed one eye.

“Let me ask again. The Sage that should have existed as well—your master—exactly who was he?”

“—? That’s a weird question. You’re the ones traveling with him, and you don’t know?”

“Unfortunately, your master hit his head on a toilet’s chamber pot and forgot several things.”

“Was there a point in specifying toilet just now?”

“Again, Master…?”

“Again?!”

Greeted by Shaula’s sympathetic gaze, Subaru suffered a humiliation that didn’t seem at all called for. But seemingly accepting Ram’s answer, Shaula leaped to her feet.

“Then allow me to make the big announcement. Master’s name…the name of the famed and great wise man! Master, who is the only one in this world fit to be called the Sage!”

“Just get to it already!”

“When else will I get the chance? But that’s totally like you.”

Shaula put on a big production of her announcement and stuck her tongue out mischievously when Subaru tried to hurry her. Then she put her finger to her cheek, acting a bit like a little girl as she continued.

And the name was—

“—Flugel.”

“…Huh?”

“Master’s name is Flugel. The great, wise man Flugel is my master.”

Puffing out her ample chest in pride, Shaula said the name with heartfelt affection. There was a mixture of unalloyed respect and gratitude in how she said it, making it impossible to suspect she was lying. And because they were sure she wasn’t lying, their reactions varied.

Because that name was undeniably familiar.

“…That’s the same guy who planted that tree.”

It was the name of the great person with whom their fates had once crossed quite a long time ago.

3

“Whoa! Scaaary! It’s so high! Not having a railing is freaky!”

“Wah, stop it, Subaru! It’s dangerous to go near the edge!”

Beatrice frantically pulled Subaru back as he peeked over the side of the spiral staircase.

Joseph and the carriage waiting on the bottom floor looked like specks. The stairs wound clockwise along the inside of the tower, and while they had only made it about halfway up, it was already quite chilly at this height.

“It’s a few dozen yards from the bottom to the next floor, but because of the spiral stairs, the walk is a couple miles…talk about inconvenient. What was the guy who made this place thinking?”

“Based on recent conversation, wouldn’t that be Flugel? It did happen four hundred years ago. Maybe they thought differently back then?”

“There are limits to what can be explained by a generation gap. Also…”

While Subaru and Beatrice held hands and walked together, Emilia trailed behind them. Subaru glanced past her, toward the tail end of the procession—

“Don’t shake so much.”

“Huh? You’re hitching a ride on my back, kiddo, so be grateful.”

“It’s way too much work climbing these hundreds of stairs up and down.”

“Well, it’s ticklish with you kicking around on my back like tha—Hey! Don’t pull my hair!”

Shaula scowled at Meili, who was riding on her back. But there was no rancor in their back-and-forth. Mysteriously, the two of them seemed to be getting along.

At the moment, Subaru and party were climbing the spiral stairs, going from the lowest floor to the next floor.

Julius and Anastasia were at the head of the procession, followed by Ram, Subaru, Beatrice, and Emilia, with the Meili-Shaula pair bringing up the rear.

The reason that pairing had happened was because Meili had complained about being tired and not wanting to climb the stairs, so Shaula had volunteered to carry her.

“She doesn’t seem like the sort to be universally loved by kids, but…”

“If you get tired, too, Subaru, just say so. If it comes to it, I can at least give you a piggyback ride.”

“It won’t ever come to that because I’m a dude.”

He was grateful for the thought, but as a young man with his pride, he had to politely decline. Even the thought of it was too much. He’d rather ask Julius for a favor than resort to that.

Anyway…

“Huh? What’s up, Master? Looking at me with such intense eyes… Have you finally realized my charms after four hundred years?!”

“You’re crazy patient! And sorry to bother you while Meili is playing with your ponytail…”

“Scorpiontail, not ponytail.”

“Huh?”

“Scorpiontail.”

“Ah, right, sure, whatever. Anyway…”

“Scorpiontail…”

“Fine, I get it! What a weird thing to get hung up on! Scorpiontail then, scorpiontail! Scorpi… Scorptail… Wow, that’s awkward to try to shorten!” She was being weirdly insistent about it, so Subaru acknowledged the point before quickly moving along. The intended topic was, of course, the name Emilia had just mentioned. “So this might be going over ground we already covered, but you’re sure that your master is Flugel?”

“Yep, yep. That’s your name, Master, so maybe stop being so weird about it? Oh! Or are you coming on to me by making me say it over and over?” Her eyes twinkled as she peered up at Subaru bashfully. “You don’t have to do that. My heart has always belonged to you, Master. I love youuu!”

“Nooo, thank you.”

“You threw it away?!”

Without missing a beat, Subaru took the feelings Shaula had just poured out and made a show of unceremoniously dumping them over the side of the stairs before clearing his throat. If he let Shaula dictate the pace of the conversation, it would never end.

“So this Flugel is the same guy behind the Great Flugel Tree, right?”

“What’s that? Some big tree somewhere?”

While Shaula was feeling depressed at having her feelings cast aside so easily, Meili cocked her head and asked an innocent question.

Subaru nodded. “Yeah, in the Liphas plains. There was a tree that reached all the way to the clouds, and it was called the Great Flugel Tree. Seeing it set my boyish heart aflutter.”

“Hehhh? Really, now. If it’s that amazing, I might want to see it one day, too.”

“Sorry, I cut it down.”

“That’s terrible!”

Subaru could only muster an awkward smile when he instantly crushed Meili’s fleeting dream.

—The Great Flugel Tree.

A little over a year ago, that towering tree became Subaru’s

trump card during the battle with the White Whale. After pinning the great demon beast of mist beneath the fallen trunk, the Sword Devil cornered the beast he had spent fourteen long years searching for and dealt the final blow with his blade.

"It's hard to believe I'd run into the Flugel who planted that tree in a place like this… Though now that you mention it, I did hear someone call him a sage before."

"But he was a sage whose accomplishments are largely unknown… The fact that he's considered a sage despite that is rather odd, I suppose," Beatrice mused.

"Just going by his few supposed achievements, it is certainly true that they don't seem to justify the lofty title of Sage. Perhaps he was simply quite skilled at trumpeting his achievements…like Barusu."

"When have I ever exaggerated the stuff I did?!"

That rude assessment touched a nerve for Subaru, but Ram looked unperturbed by his reaction.

While that was going on, Anastasia was nodding to herself up at the front of their party. With Julius leading her by the hand, she turned her head back toward them to chime in.

"From the sound of it, Shaula and Flugel had their achievements mixed up by later generations… Or more likely, they were all pinned on her, right?"

"You mean Flugel made it seem like Shaula had done the things he did?"

Emilia's eyes widened in shock at the mind-blowing hypothesis. Anastasia nodded and looked back at Shaula again.

"Or at least that's what I was thinking. But do you think your master is the sort of person who would do that?"

"Mmm, to be honest, I didn't really get what Master was thinking a lot of the time. But he didn't really like standing out too much. So him pinning any annoying rumors on me to avoid dealing with them definitely sounds like something he would do."

It wasn't exactly the most confidence-inspiring response, but by and large, Shaula seemed to be supporting Anastasia's theory. At the same time, something was bothering Subaru.

"If he was that determined to hide, then how did his name get passed down through the ages as some great sage?"

"Um, according to a book I read…the reason Flugel's name became known is because the words 'Flugel was here' were found

carved into the top of the Great Flugel Tree."

"He *what*?! Was he some kid on a field trip?!" Subaru couldn't believe his ears. How could that be considered staying on the down-low? "To be totally fair, I considered doing the same thing, but Rem stopped me… For Flugel to actually do it, he must've been one hell of an idiot."

"His name took on a life of its own, and because of it, Sage Flugel became known through the ages as a great but mysterious figure. And now, after all these years, to hear from the mouth of a different Sage that the man lived up to the legends… It truly makes you think. How thrilling it is to be in the position to fill a gap in history."

"Don't go turning into a history nerd, man…"

Julius seemed excited to be learning a bit of hidden history from four hundred years ago.

He has strong opinions about magic, too, or at least a tendency to get into long, rambling explanations. Maybe he just has a hidden nerdy side?

"They do say that philosophers have many loves, so maybe this nerdy dude is the same…"

"Sorry to interrupt your thoughts, but watch your feet. We're nearing the top."

"Oh?"

Looking up, Subaru saw the end of the spiral staircase just in front of him.

Julius and Anastasia had reached the landing a few steps ahead, soon followed by Ram and the rest of the party. They were greeted by an open space that was noticeably different from the bottom floor.

And the first thing that caught Subaru's eye was—

"Whoa, that's a crazy huge door…"

The door was well over ten yards tall and ten yards wide. It was made of a strange material that appeared to be stone. *Is it the same material as the wall?*

"This is the official entrance to the tower. It's pointlessly large, but it actually opened and closed when we entered."

"I see. So you've already gone in then? …Wait, what?"

Hearing that they had used the entrance to the tower already, Subaru swung his head around. In the crazy big space around them, there was nothing other than the spiral stairs they had climbed

connecting them to the floor they had come from.

"Then how did Joseph and the carriage get all the way down there? There's no way the carriage could take stairs that narrow…"

"Ah, Shaula carried the carriage and the land dragon. She just lifted them over her head."

"…Pardon?"

Thinking he had misheard something, Subaru looked at Emilia, who was adorably miming what she was describing without batting an eye. And no one was correcting her.

Seeing Subaru's reaction, Shaula puffed her chest out, her nostrils flaring slightly.

"Like she said, I carried them. No sweat."

"The shock is winning out over the gratitude. That sounds like something even Reinhard couldn't do."

In Subaru's head, Reinhard was indisputably the person most likely to do something absurd or crazy, but even he wouldn't lift a whole carriage over his head. He could split the world in half with the force of his sword, or walk on water, or even come back to life once, but that sort of brute strength was—

"Actually, could he? I'm not so sure anymore. Is he human?"

His cluttered thoughts about his friend aside, Subaru had finally figured out how the carriage had gotten down to the bottom. In which case, were the giant doors in front of him also operated manually using Shaula's insane strength?

"All I can say is they didn't move at all when I pushed on them. That's why we couldn't do much to look for Lady Anastasia or the rest of you once we found ourselves in here after we got separated."

"Gotcha. So they are as heavy as they look. I gotta admit, the ancient-ruins feeling of it all does get me going, but…"

Subaru didn't hate these sorts of buildings that felt like something straight out of a fantasy novel. Unfortunately, he wasn't really in a situation where he could afford to stop and take his sweet time admiring every little thing.

Looking at the doors, he thought he could feel a faint sandy texture on his tongue. Probably because this floor connected to the outside. Upon closer examination, he could see yellow sand scattered all around the floor.

Anastasia said, "The sandstorm is strong, but be careful about the sand that filters inside. Breathe in too much without realizing it and your body probably won't be very happy."

“The dunes here are filled with miasma. It would be unwise to underestimate it simply because the concentration is low,” Julius also cautioned.

“Yeah. Agreed. But…”

Subaru nodded at their warnings as he peered up at the ceiling.

They had reached this floor after a very long climb up the spiral stairs, but the Pleiades Watchtower’s high, high walls still continued upward. At the very least, the next floor was also connected by a spiral staircase.

“Seeing stairs again is seriously demoralizing… But it also finally feels real.”

“Feels real?” Emilia asked, standing beside him.

“Yeah, this is definitely the Pleiades Watchtower that we were searching for.”

The rest of his comrades all nodded at his quiet statement.

It wasn’t as if they had achieved their goals yet. They still had not found a way to save all the people waiting for them to return. But all the same, they had cleared the first hurdle.

They had reached the Pleiades Watchtower at the edge of the Auguria Dunes, an impenetrable land.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk, I have to correct you there, Master.”

While Subaru was busy basking in the moment, Shaula wagged her finger in disagreement. Looking back at her, she had a wicked, smug smile on her face.

“That level of understanding only gets you ninety-nine points.”

“Isn’t that basically perfect?!”

“The core concept is lacking, though! And the score only goes that high *after* factoring in a whole lot of bonus points for how much I love, love, looove you!”

Putting a hand to her forehead, Shaula seemed to be reflecting on how lenient her grading apparently was. Then, still carrying Meili on her back, she ran out in front of the party and spun around with flair, spreading her arms with the giant door at her back.

“The Pleiades Watchtower is just a temporary name for a temporary role. With Master back now, it can fulfill its original purpose.”

“Original…?”

“Thaaat’s right. This is a great library where anything you might want to know and anything you might want to discover can be found.”

Subaru's face shuddered when he heard that.

Because that was exactly what they—what Subaru—wanted so badly. A method of omniscience to grant salvation to the ignorant; that was what they had come in search of.

And the name of that deliverance he sought was—

"—The Great Pleiades Library very, very, very happily welcomes your return, Master!"

4

They had arrived at their destination. The door to the room was covered in a dense layer of green vines.

"This is…"

Subaru was at a loss for words.

Before him was the first proper plant he had seen since they had stepped foot in the desert. The miasma that filled the sandstorms was anathema to living things, and other than the sand itself, their party had not really seen anything that could be called natural.

"And the only exception was those nasty demon beasts that turned into flowers…"

Those oiran bears ordinarily lived in forests. A swarm of them created an unnatural field of flowers in the middle of the desert, which was basically the one natural-looking thing they had seen in days. Of course, that looked so out of place to begin with that the camouflage didn't really do its job.

"

“The jungle vibes are crazy. Shaula called it the green room, but damn…” Subaru felt like that was a little too on the nose. As that thought crossed his mind, he looked back and noticed that the entrance had been sealed back up by the vines. In surprise, he blurted, “Whoa, Ram! We’ve been cut off!”

“You’re too easily frightened. There is a limit on how many people can enter this room. The intention of the room’s master, it seems.”

“By that, you mean…?”

“—A spirit.”

With that terse answer, Ram quickly moved deeper into the room. Subaru studied the closed door for a moment and scratched his head before hurrying after Ram.

Thick vines carpeted the entire room. Stepping over and ducking under the thick vegetation, they carefully navigated the area dominated by green plant life. And after going as far as they could…

“Rem…and Patlash…”

In the deepest reaches of the green room, Subaru could see a space quite different from the mess of vines that filled the rest of the room. There was a bed made of a downy layer of green grass with small flowers blooming here and there.

And on top of that green bed adorned with flowers lay Rem.

“

she peered at Subaru just like she always had in the stables.

"You really went overboard protecting me down there. You're just so…" Subaru brushed Patlash's neck with his palm as she rubbed her nose against his check. Subaru felt a bit of relief at the display of affection, but he still steeled his heart. "I get that you're not a heroine who needs saving, but still, don't make me worry so much. I was seriously afraid this time… Ow, oww, owwwww!"

"—!"

Before he could finish scolding Patlash for her brave but reckless actions underground, a sharp scale bit into his neck.

"Wh-what was that for…?"

"Otto isn't here, so allow me to interpret. Apparently, she's saying 'I don't want to hear that from you.' I couldn't have said it better myself."

Ram crossed her arms as she decided to add her own opinion. But judging from Patlash's eyes, her translation was more or less on the money.

"Huh? You're already breaking all the rules, but I'm the one who needs to be more careful?"

"It's a simple question of probability. No matter how you look at it, that land dragon there has much better odds of surviving than you. You're like a candle flickering in a blizzard."

"A candle burns brightest right before it burns out, don't you know? And who the hell asked you?"

Beneath the withering gazes of Ram and his trusty dragon, Subaru's shoulders slumped. Then he started to examine Patlash's body when he noticed a warm, faint light around the wounds where her scales had been gouged out.

"This spirit's power apparently has the ability to speed up the healing process."

"Right, you said this room's master is a spirit… Where is that spirit anyway?"

"And you call yourself a spirit mage? This room itself is the spirit."

Rubbing Patlash again as he talked to Ram, Subaru caught his breath when she revealed the true nature of the healing spirit.

Now that he was paying attention to it, he could tell that the room was filled with a dense mana, which explained the incredible foliage in the green room.

It felt sort of like his body was being healed from the inside,

almost as if he was in an oxygen-rich environment.

"I can sort of feel it, yeah. This is definitely a spirit… Doesn't seem like we can communicate, though?"

"This spirit is an odd one…though that goes for all spirits. Be it Lady Emilia's great spirit or Lady Beatrice… The spirit here is unusual in that it doesn't seem to have any will, so to speak. It simply attempts to heal the wounds and sicknesses of all living creatures that enter."

Ram moved beside Rem as she said that. When she did, some vines behind her started moving, writhing and twisting into a green chair. It seemed to be a thoughtful gesture for the elder sister watching over her younger sister. Once Ram sat down, the classic scene of family visiting a patient in a hospital was complete.

"It's kind of amazing."

"If nothing else, it's certainly the most well-mannered out of all the spirits I've met. You should take this chance to brush up on your own manners, Barusu. Whether from this spirit or from Sir Julius."

"I can't really say I'm happy about those suggestions." Brushing away the idea of using either as a role model, Subaru scratched Patlash's neck, told her "Take your time and rest up," and then gently laid her head back down before turning back to Ram. "I can see that even though Patlash's wounds are being healed, there's no visible effect on Rem…just like you all mentioned downstairs."

"Her condition is neither a wound nor a sickness, so it can't be healed. That seems to be what the spirit decided."

"…I see…"

Tasting the same disappointment from before, Subaru sighed.

But even if she wasn't someone who could be healed, the spirit of the room didn't hesitate to take care of Rem in her sleep. The way it treated Ram was ample evidence of that.

"In the end, nothing has changed."

"…If you want to change it, then you'll have to do what you came to do in this tower."

"The Great Pleiades Library, huh…?"

Standing beside Ram, Subaru peered down at Rem's sleeping face.

The Great Pleiades Library.

That was the Pleiades Watchtower's true name and its true function. If Shaula was to be believed, the answer they desperately wanted was somewhere inside.

“I’ll find the answer and bring Rem back. My goal hasn’t changed.”

“…I see. Good.”

Holding Rem’s hand, Ram didn’t so much as glance in his direction. She was curt, but that made her seem all the more reliable when it came to Rem.

“Incidentally, why is there a chair for you but not for me? This is some clear-cut discrimination.”

“Animals have an instinct for sniffing out hierarchies. Perhaps spirits are the same.”

“Rem said something similar once.”

Before Rem and Subaru got along, Rem had made a remark about why they were treated differently by the children in Earlham. It was a nostalgic memory. Quite some time had passed since he had last checked in on the village.

“First thing’s first.”

Subaru exhaled, letting go of the empty feeling that had started to well up as he composed his face.

“All right! I’m going back to where everyone else is. What about you?”

“You would get worried if someone isn’t watching Rem, right? I’ll keep an eye on her. That’s why I came here in the first place.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. In that case, I’ll leave her to you.”

“I can’t do anything other than watch over her.”

“There’s meaning in you doing that.”

After reassuring Ram in a rare moment of self-deprecation, Subaru examined Rem’s face again. Expressionless, neither peaceful nor pained, she was still lost in dreams.

Reaching his hand out to her forehead, he touched her with tender affection.

He was relieved to be able to do that much. And while knowing that a part of him wanted so much more, his expression softened.

“I’ll be back.”

“……”

Naturally, there was no response.

Ram knew those words were not meant for her and tactfully remained silent. Satisfied, Subaru headed toward the green room’s exit.

“Speaking of good manners… Please take care of Rem and Patlash.”

Before leaving, he touched the vine on the wall and made a request of the spirit protecting the room.

Even if it is impossible to talk with the spirit, my sincerity might still get through. And my gratitude, of course.

It might have been nothing more than self-indulgence, but having conveyed his thoughts, Subaru—

"Oh, that reminds me. For someone who declared that her place is at Rem's side, you sure did travel far to pay us a visit all the way downstairs."

"……"

"It can't be that you hurried down in a rush when you heard I woke up, right? If there was some special reason, then tell me, so —"

"Hurry up and leave. Now."

"Eh? But it's just… If there was something that you thought of, it might be a hint for—"

"Get a move on."

Overwhelmed by the mounting pressure, Subaru didn't say anything else as he was forced to quickly retreat from the green room.

5

"I never really know what Ram's thinking, but she's been more mysterious than usual lately."

"Mm, I don't think so. Despite how she seems, she's surprisingly honest. I think it's cute how she tries to hide that side of her."

"You sound like an older sister… Though I guess you *are* technically older than me."

"Right. I'm an older sister. Older than everyone here… Well, not everyone…"

"Hmph. Betty is the eldest here. That is a fact that can't be changed by anyone. Feel free to idolize me."

Emilia was disappointed she couldn't claim to be the oldest on the team while Beatrice's chest swelled with satisfaction, but Subaru honestly didn't think either of them really exuded the older sister vibe. And exactly who was oldest in the party was a bit of a delicate topic.

"Hmm? What is it, Natsuki? Was there something you wanted to talk about?"

“Not particularly. Just thinking there were a lot of people who don’t really look their age in our group.”

“Oh really? People do tell me that I look a lot younger than I am. It’s a little hard to know if I should be happy about it, but I guess if people are going to underestimate me, I should let them.”

Anastasia flashed a smile that was half joking and half business, but it was unclear how she really felt.

It was true she had a sort of baby face, but that surface-level distinction was not really what Subaru meant. He had been referring to Foxidna, who was inhabiting Anastasia.

If her origin was the same as Beatrice, then she was definitely in the running for oldest being present. But it was a little too big of a secret to reveal in the spur of the moment.

“But there’s another favorite in this race.”

“Hey. What’s up, Master? Tired of the plant smell in the green room? I getcha. Can’t stand that place.”

“Whoa, you’re talking about the spirit that’s gone out of its way to look after Rem and Patlash. Watch your mouth or I’ll shove some grass up your nose.” Subaru put his finger on the tip of Shaula’s nose, pushing her away when she sidled up to him. “More importantly, tell me about this Great Pleiades Library.”

“Mm, right. You hardly explained anything before, but you can tell us more now, right?”

“Sure thing. If Master asks, I can’t say no.” Shaula nodded with a harebrained grin at Subaru and Emilia’s follow-up. Tapping the floor lightly with the toe of her boot, she continued. “Like I said before, this place’s true name is the Great Pleiades Library. The entrance is on the fifth floor, Celaeno, downstairs is the sixth floor, Asterope, and this is the fourth floor, Alcyone. Got it so far?”

“It’s weird for each floor to have its own name, but…yeah, I’m following for now.”

Subaru nodded and took in their surroundings with fresh eyes. At present, they were on the fourth floor—having gone up the spiral staircase one flight from the fifth floor, where the entrance was. And as the green room demonstrated, the tower’s interior changed a great deal starting at the fourth floor.

The most notable difference was that it had stopped being one giant space and was divided up into several separate rooms. The staircase from the fifth floor connected to the center of the fourth floor, and it would take a lot of time to cover the entire floor.

“The fourth floor, Alcyone, is sort of like my lair. It’s pretty messy and all, so it’s a bit embarrassing having people poking around.”

“

ended up somewhere between forgiveness and resignation.

"But wouldn't he have died if that hit him? So it's not really a question of getting angry or not." Meili poked Shaula in the side as she said that.

Shaula simply burst into hearty laughter.

"Pwah-ha-ha-ha! What are you talkin' about? Master wouldn't die from something so minor. He's a strange sort of guy who might not even be able to die."

"But, you know, all those cute sandworms died…"

"Who cares about sandworms and bears. Master doesn't die. That's the important thing. If he died, then he wouldn't be Master."

With a hearty smile, Shaula glanced happily over at Subaru. It was an almost childlike innocence and unshakable trust. She had a much sturdier image of Flugel than Subaru had imagined.

If, for some reason, I do anything that betrays her expectations…

That thought sent a chill up Subaru's spine.

"…If she finds out that you aren't Flugel, there is no telling what will happen, I suppose."

"Meaning it would be dangerous to correct her or clear up this misunderstanding…"

Guessing what Subaru was thinking, Beatrice whispered a gentle warning.

The only reason that Shaula was so friendly toward their party —or rather, toward Subaru—was simply because she had decided that Subaru was her master. It was a delicate situation.

"If she turns against us, we'll have no choice but for Emilia, Julius, you, and Betty to handle her."

In other words, Shaula was a bomb that could go off anytime for any reason. It was hard to deny that she was an incredibly dangerous person to deal with, but—

"With how openly she acts, it's hard to hate her…"

So far, Subaru hadn't been putting much thought into how he interacted with Shaula, but he didn't hold anything against her. Even after factoring in the two sniping deaths he had experienced, she had saved his life underground. He didn't think of her as an enemy. It would have been much easier if he was fighting Regulus or Petelgeuse.

"…Remembering those guys really soured my mood. I guess that's to be expected, but still, it's more of a familiar hatred."

"—? What is it, Master?"

“Nothing.”

Thinking about the two loathsome creeps because of Beatrice’s warning, Subaru’s expression had grown severe. When Shaula took a close look at his face, he pushed her away from him.

“But just to be clear, the reason you snipe anyone who tries to reach the tower is because…”

“Because you told me to! Four hundred years spent watching the sands day in and day out. A heartrending tale in the telling and in the listening!”

“How sad…”

Emilia, with her deep reserves of empathy, teared up a bit at Shaula’s emotional answer.

Setting aside that beautiful moment of E M T, Shaula doesn’t seem to feel any remorse or have any doubts about that mission. She isn’t emotionless, though…

“She was just following orders… Feeling pity is as meaningless as asking a tool how it feels about the way it was used.”

“Yeah, right! I’m Master’s tool! That’s a good way to put it, kiddo!”

Shaula flashed a bright smile as if Beatrice’s unsympathetic judgment described it perfectly.

The way her mood and expressions changed so fluidly and her understanding of her place in life—it all pointed to Shaula having a dramatically different set of values. That was probably part of the reason why they kept talking past each other.

“Your view is kind of…wild…in a lot of ways. But we can save that for later. We’re getting way too far off track, so let’s circle back to the main point. You were explaining the tower. We know about floors six through four now, so what about the floors above them?”

“The third floor, Taygeta, is the examination hall. That’s where your right to access the archive is tested.”

“…The archive…”

Subaru clenched his fist.

If the name of the Great Pleiades Library was not a lie, then of course there would be a physical library filled with knowledge. The reason they had passed through the desert should have been waiting for them there.

“Interesting that you call it the examination hall. And the right to enter the archive is also curious phrasing…”

“At present, that is our greatest obstacle.”

As Subaru focused on that term, Julius shrugged. His tone was down, as if ashamed of himself, and he looked up at the ceiling.

The ceiling—or rather, the third floor—where the examination hall Taygeta awaited.

"Ah, I get it. While I was asleep, you all took on the challenge then? Any progress?"

"Sorry to disappoint, but nothing of the sort. With Ms. Shaula's guidance, reaching the third floor itself was no trouble, but…"

"But?"

"What awaited us there was an impenetrable mystery. To be honest, we've been unable to find so much as a clue these past two days."

Is that just modesty? Well, Julius does hate it when people underrate themselves, and judging from everyone else's faces, things are not looking good. Most likely, they didn't manage to get anywhere.

"That said, there is no penalty for attempting the examination and failing. We have gone in and out several times already without any issue… It's just that we've failed every time."

"I see. So it's a tough question then… Still, though, an examination, huh?"

"—? Do you have any thoughts?"

Julius raised an eyebrow as Subaru got hung up on something. But what was troubling him was not what Julius might have been hoping.

"No, it's just that I have a bad experience running around in circles thanks to a different trial. The parallels here made me remember it."

"I know the feeling. I had the same thought, too."

Subaru and Emilia's shared reaction was of course because of the trial they had undergone in a certain tomb in the Sanctuary. Setting obstacles in order to test challengers was the sort of system that nasty Witch would enjoy.

That naturally made Subaru a bit suspicious of Anastasia/Foxidna.

"What? What did I do?"

"…I was just surprised with how knowledgeable you seem that you couldn't manage to solve it. 'The accumulated four hundred years of knowledge passed down in Kararagi!' or something like that."

"Sorry, I'm not much for stuff beyond business. So if anything,

we're all countin' on you, Natsuki."

"Who, me?"

Easily dodging the suspicion he couldn't detail in the open, Anastasia turned the focus back onto Subaru before nodding and glancing over at Shaula.

"Well, she's awfully attached to you, so if you bring her along, maybe she'll let a hint or two slip out, right?"

"Counting on someone else to save you? Is it really that difficult of a problem?"

"More like there are absolutely no clues. Rather than trying to explain, it would be easier if you just see it yourself."

It was not a good sign that the exam question was so hard that everyone was already looking for a loophole rather than face it head-on.

"Okay, I got it. For now, let's see what this exam is. If there's no penalty for failing, then there's no harm if things don't work out."

"Yes, that's right. Like Lady Anastasia, I have high hopes for you."

Saying that, Julius led the way as the party prepared to challenge the examination again. Having people pin their hopes on him made Subaru uneasy, but it was a problem that they had banged their heads against for two days without any progress. He had to at least try. But for now…

"Hey, Shaula, you got a moment?"

"—? Subaru?"

Beatrice had a dubious look on her face when Subaru called Shaula over on the way up to the third floor. They were at the back of the line and talking quietly enough that the others could not hear. Shaula was not on guard at all, her scorpiontail swinging as she smiled.

"What is it?"

"You'll listen to what I tell you, right?"

"Anything too racy is no good, though."

"Get your mind out of the gutter. You trying to kill the mood?"

"Isn't that exactly what you're doing?"

Shaula pouted as Subaru scratched his head, unable to settle into his own pace.

Almost everyone else tended to feel thrown off their rhythm when talking with Subaru, so he often used that to find openings for directing the conversation, but that plan wasn't working so well

with this woman.

“Well, then I’ll just get straight to the point. I have a request, Shaula.”

“Wh-what is it? You look so serious. By any chance, have you falle—?”

“Do not cause any harm to me or my comrades.”

“

“What’s up?”

She answered with an untroubled, casual response, and Subaru brushed it off as he raised both his hands and then held up six fingers.

“Maia, Electra, Taygeta, Alcyone, Celaeno, Asterope.”

Not understanding what he was saying, Beatrice’s cute face looked troubled. Smiling at her, Subaru showed the fingers to Shaula.

“From top to bottom, those are the names of the floors of the Pleiades Watchtower—or rather, the Great Pleiades Library… right?”

“Correctamundo. The first floor is Maia, and the second floor is Electra.”

“Thought so. In which case…”

Looking at Shaula, who was nodding, Subaru added a seventh finger. After drawing Beatrice and Shaula’s attention to it, he asked his true question.

“Where is Merope?”

“

“A zeroth floor, meaning it should be above the first… Or no, since you didn’t call the sixth floor the lowest. In which case, it isn’t up, it’s underground—”

“—No good.”

When Subaru tried to confirm its existence, Shaula immediately interrupted him. Subaru caught his breath at the intensity of her tone, but there was no change in Shaula’s face. She was still smiling, and her eyes were filled with trust. But there was a trace of loneliness, too.

“The requirements haven’t been fulfilled yet. You came back to meet me in the middle of your journey, and that’s enough. So the zeroth floor is no good.”

Her tone was not particularly different, but there was something strange about her voice. It almost felt like a wall was going up.

To Subaru’s ears, a trace of danger had seeped in, as if the promise she had just made was being threatened.

“…Got it. I won’t ask anymore. Just keep the promise you made.”

“Roger. I will. You can count on me.”

Shaula broke into a smile, getting excited as if she had already forgotten the floor conversation.

Subaru heaved a sigh of relief when he heard her cheery response coming from behind him.

“Subaru, if it ever becomes too much to bear, you can always talk to Betty.”

“Mm, I’m all right. Just a lot to think about is all.”

Smiling weakly, he patted her head gently. Beatrice didn’t say anything else, but this little ritual of theirs helped Subaru calm down.

The conversation with Shaula and the oddity of the image of Flugel had started to come to light.

It was nothing too unexpected. But he was like Subaru, too.

Subaru, Al, Hoshin, and now Flugel. A being who brought knowledge with him that did not exist in this world, leaving it to later generations. There was, without a doubt, only one explanation.

Flugel was also a stranger in a foreign land, hailing from the same place as Subaru.

“A few hundred years ago, huh?”

Mulling over that long, long span of time, Subaru wildly scratched his head.

What had Flugel thought of this world? What had he hoped, had he sought, had he wanted to gain?

After abandoning the title of Sage, how had he lived in this world?

And while those thoughts filled Subaru's mind…

"Master."

"Huh?"

Shaula breezily called out to him. She stopped walking, and a half step later, Subaru stopped as well. Looking back, he was met head-on by Shaula's smile.

It was a sincerely happy, loving expression.

"Welcome back, Master. From the bottom of my heart, I, Shaula, have always longed for the Sage Flugel's return."

CHAPTER 2

A WHITE SKY ASTERISM

1

—Subaru was unsure how to feel about Shaula's formal welcome.

He never intended to deceive her. But he was definitely not the Flugel Shaula had been waiting four hundred years for.

If that isn't a betrayal, then what is?

"I understand the feeling, but you don't have to worry too much, Subaru. Even if Shaula realizes you aren't her master, I'm sure it won't be the end of the world."

Noticing Subaru's glum look, Emilia chimed in supportively. She flashed a smile brimming with confidence as she played with her braid.

"I appreciate the vote of confidence, but what makes you say that?"

"I mean, she's a good person, isn't she? She helped us, and we are getting along perfectly fine. And there's no reason to start a fight, right?"

"…Right…"

It was a far too optimistic outlook, but being too pessimistic all the time was also a bad habit. Even if Shaula learned the truth, that wouldn't necessarily make them instant enemies. They just had to build a good rapport with her so that even if she found out, they could move past it without a confrontation. That was the ideal.

"—Mister? We're here."

Meili pulled Subaru out of his thoughts.

They had reached a room on the opposite side of the circle from the green room. Past the simple door without any vines covering it, there was a staircase in the middle that led upward.

“Just a normal set of stairs. Were spiral stairs out of season or something?”

“I suppose it’s natural to wonder, given the long set of stairs from the bottom floor, but the set going from the third to the fourth floor is a normal length. To begin with, unlike the spiral staircase where climbing is all that is required—”

“Right, if we can’t clear the examination, we can’t actually reach the floor.”

Subaru finished Julius’s line of thought for him.

The examination that they had already challenged and failed multiple times was waiting at the other end of those stairs. And according to the rest of the party, it would be faster if he saw it for himself.

There’s no penalty for failing, either, and they know better, so if they say so…

“Might as well then. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Shall we?”

“Mm-hmm, that’s the spirit.” “That’s the spirit.” “That’s da spirit.”

Emilia, Beatrice, and Shaula all agreed in their own way, and Subaru stepped onto the stairs. He steeled his resolve with each step.

And almost disappointingly easily, he set foot onto the third floor, Taygeta.

“This is…”

The moment he entered the room, he felt something was off.

It felt like walking into an anomaly, or more like a space where nothing felt right.

—White.

The space was pure white.

The inside should have been a cylinder, a simple extension of all the previous floors, but when Subaru entered the room, he was greeted by a strange expanse that spread out in every direction. The area should not have been noticeably larger than the previous floors, but the overwhelming whiteness made it impossible to see the walls, making it feel endless. Looking up, he couldn’t make out the ceiling, either. Looking down, there was just a single black hole where the stairs emerged from the floor below. Everything else was so white that he was almost scared to walk on it.

He was hit by a disorienting feeling that the floor wasn’t there

and he might just start falling into nothingness. The floor, ceiling, and walls were all the same. Subaru felt like he would end up wandering the vast emptiness if he lost track of where the stairs were.

And right in front of him in that white space—directly in front of the stairs—there was a mysterious object floating in the air.

"A stone slab…?"

That was his first impression. There wasn't really any other way to describe it.

It was a rectangular black slab made of a material that was almost slick to the touch. On closer examination, it didn't seem to actually be stone, but he didn't think it was metal, either, so he wasn't sure what to call it.

If I'm being dramatic, then maybe monolith would work.

The silent monolith was floating mysteriously, hanging in the air a dozen inches off the ground. Based on its height and width, Subaru felt it resembled a large tatami mat floating in the air.

"So this strange thing is…what, exactly?"

"If I was to put it into words, that is the device that sets up the puzzle for us."

While Subaru was occupied by its strange brightness, Julius joined him in staring at the monolith.

Thinking of the trouble this thing had already given him, Julius's expression was severe. As Emilia and the others entered the white space, they drew close, possibly to counteract the pervasive feeling of emptiness.

"I'd rather not spend a lot of time in a place like this."

"Agreed. Staying here too long is draining. And seeing a certain someone trip on the stairs while leaving is not good for my heart."

"Come on, Julius, don't be like that."

Anastasia's cheeks puffed up as she protested Julius's joke. Judging by that reaction, she must have been the one who tripped earlier.

But Subaru had no urge to laugh at that. The room had clearly been designed to screw with people's senses. It was like a manifestation of its creator's malice.

"So then, what do I do to get the riddle?"

"Touch that slab and the examination will begin, I suppose."

"I just have to touch the monolith?"

"—Monolith? An oddly fitting term. That's a good word for it."

Ignoring how Julius was impressed by the strangest things, Subaru stood in front of the monolith. Even looking at it from up close, it wasn't like there was some odd pressure emanating from it or anything. Other than floating in the air, it was just an inscrutable slab. Though the fact that it was floating was incredibly mysterious, so it could be considered a mess of mysteries…

"Either way… I just touch it, right? Can I get a countdown?"

"Ah, then I'll do it. Three, two, one…"

"Too fast, too fast!"

Emilia raised her hand and immediately started counting down. In time with her, Subaru spun to face the monolith, and—

"Zero!"

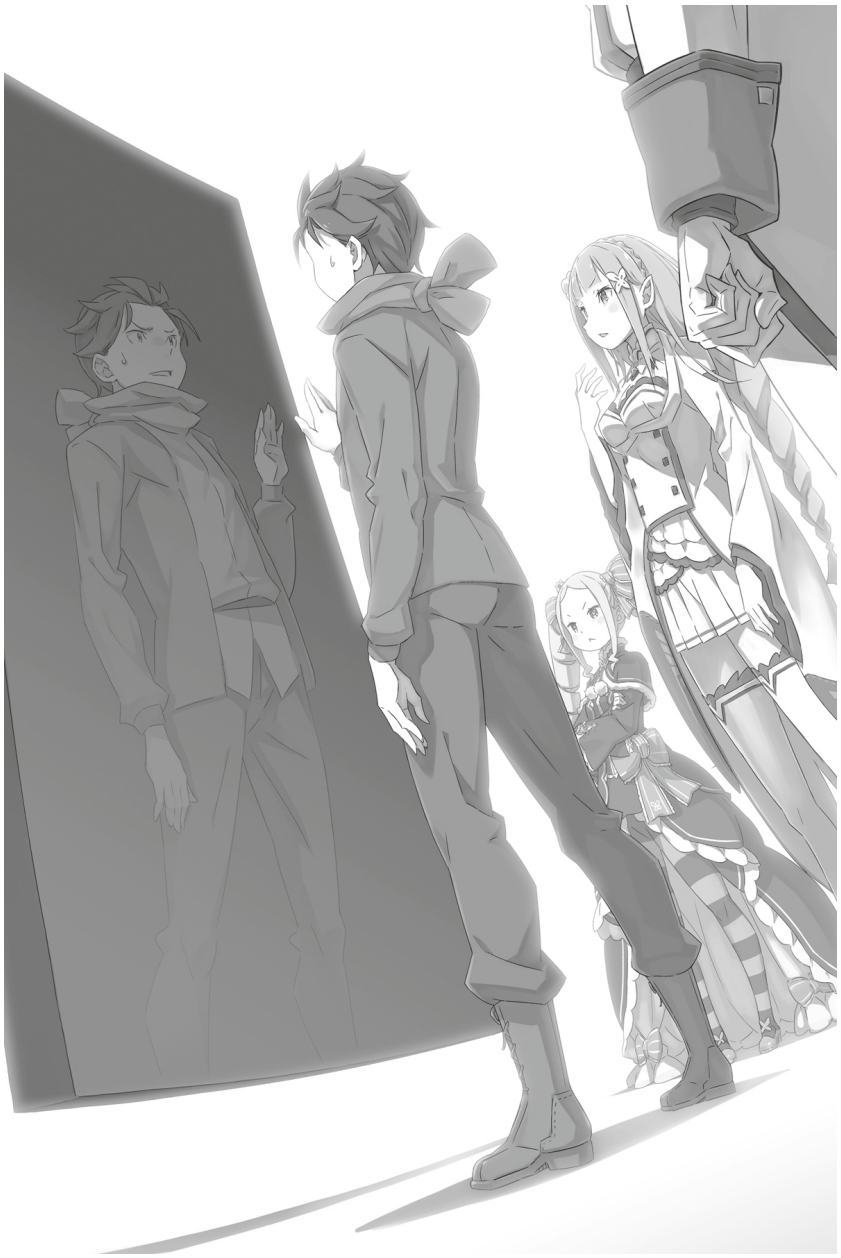
Subaru touched it just as Emilia finished. The next instant, a swell of light shot out of the monolith, and suddenly, he started seeing double.

No… It's not me.

The monolith suddenly started multiplying as its black surface gleamed. The front face shone while more monoliths appeared from behind it, one after the other. They flew at high speed around the white room, scattering to various points before stopping and hanging in the air.

The sudden change took Subaru by total surprise. He watched in stunned silence as a voice echoed directly in his head.

"Great hero destroyed by Shaula, touch upon his grandest splendor."



"—?!"

Subaru reflexively pulled his hand away from the monolith. Frantically stumbling back, he felt someone supporting him from behind.

"Well, did you experience a bit of the surprise we felt at first?"

"That's what this was about?!"

Subaru protested the moment he saw Julius's faint smile.

The examination for Taygeta, the third floor of the Great Pleiades Library.

Time: unlimited. Attempts: unlimited. Challengers: unlimited.

—Examination start.

2

Brushing away Julius's hand, Subaru stood up on his own and faced the examination.

The duplicate monoliths now filled the white space, leaving the one that Subaru had touched at the very center. There were so many now that it would have been a pain to count them all.

"So this is the examination… That about sum it up, Shaula?"

"Is there any reason it shouldn't? Let me see a bit of your cool side, Master."

With Shaula's easygoing support urging him on, Subaru scanned the room. Other than the monolith copies, there was no change in the vast white space. And looking closer, the new monoliths were not pure copy-pastes of the original. They had slight differences in size.

"Other than that, the only thing that could be called a hint is that voice, huh?"

Great hero destroyed by Shaula, touch upon his grandest splendor.

It had not reached his ears. Instead, those words had apparently been whispered directly to his brain. Subaru hadn't even given any thought to who the voice might have belonged to, perhaps because there had not actually been a sound.

It almost felt like the voice in my head when I read to myself.

"If I had to describe it, I'd say it was my own voice… I guess

that's the exam question, then?"

"Sorry to interrupt while you are thinking, but there are a few points of interest. It would probably be worthwhile to hear those before facing the question itself."

"So *now* you want to explain things first."

Subaru frowned and stared at Julius, still sore about the minor prank. But Julius took it all in stride.

"I said seeing it would be easier than explaining it. That was all. I had not expected you to be so surprised, so allow me to apologize for that."

"All right, all right! Sorry for being a scaredy-cat! So what are these points of interest?"

"Very well. Try touching the stone slab—or monolith, as you called it—right over there."

"You really liked that, huh? I mean, it's fine if you did…"

Julius was apparently enjoying his word choice more than he had realized. Subaru shrugged and walked over to one of the newly created monoliths.

"There's not some kind of trap that will swallow up my arm when I touch it or anything, is there?"

"It will be fine. And if something like that was to happen, Betty will serve as your right arm for the rest of your life."

"Ah, then I'll be your left arm. So don't worry."

"That would mean I lost both arms!"

Spurred on by Beatrice's and Emilia's strong reassurances, Subaru worked up his courage and reached out to touch the monolith. He refused to be surprised no matter what happened—

"Whoa?!"

But he stood no chance. When his fingertip brushed the monolith, the black surface flashed brilliantly again. Reflexively covering his eyes, he shouted "Again?!" before cautiously reopening them.

"Huh? Where'd it go?"

"Heh-heh-heh, behind you, Master."

The monolith that should have been in front of him, and every other one that had filled the white space before, suddenly disappeared. Shaula gloated for no reason while Subaru tried to understand what happened.

Turning around at her comment, he saw just a single monolith behind him. It was the original that had been there from the start

when he entered the third floor.

"All the others disappeared. Meaning what?"

"It has returned to its original state. Meaning the examination has concluded as a failure, I would imagine. Of course…"

Walking past Subaru, who was dumbfounded, Julius approached the first monolith and touched its surface, and then the voice echoed in Subaru's head again—

"Great hero destroyed by Shaula, touch upon his grandest splendor."

At the same time as the question echoed in their heads again, new monoliths poured out of the original and scattered to their previous positions around the room. The examination had been reset.

"I see, so this is a retry. We can take the test as many times as we want."

"At least, that is our observation thus far. Also, to be clear, going around touching all of them in succession using a process of elimination is not considered an acceptable answer."

"Ah, so you guys tried a scattershot approach."

Subaru read between the lines of Julius's delicate explanation, and Emilia blushed.

I see. Trying to touch all of them is definitely something she'd think of. And if that didn't work out, then…

"An answer arrived at without thought is apparently not sufficient for whoever set this problem."

"Mm-hmm, there's always teachers like that. Zero credit for answers that don't show your work. It's a good way to stop kids from cribbing from other people's answers."

Considering the whole point of a test at school, you could say that just an answer really isn't enough. Though there was a time I complained about how tyrannical teachers were for using that sort of system.

"At this point, though, I think the teacher was right…"

"Sorry to interrupt while you're taking another trip down memory lane, but this is sort of your time to shine, Natsuki. So get a grip, would you?"

"Er, uhh, sorry. But what do you mean by *my* time to shine?"

Anastasia put her hand on her hip as Subaru cocked his head. Her eyes turned toward Shaula.

"Oh… You're telling me to ask her what the answer is?"

“I said it before, didn’t I? We’re counting on you. She wouldn’t talk to us.”

“That’s a little hard to believe…”

From what they said, Shaula was almost completely silent before he woke up, but from the moment he’d been awake, she couldn’t have been friendlier. Overfamiliar, even, so it was hard for him to imagine.

But even if she was willing to talk, there was another big problem with asking her.

“Hey, Shaula, you got any idea who it might mean by a hero that you destroyed?”

“Remembering the names of everyone you killed is for amateurs… A pro like me doesn’t remember anyone past the first hundred.”

Shaula flashed an energetic thumbs-up.

“Figures!”

That was pretty much exactly what he expected.

“However, if we leave it at that, the conversation cannot proceed. Ms. Shaula, do you really not remember anything? Even if it is just something minor?”

“I mean, you say that, but I just Hell’s Sniped everyone who got close to this tower, and the demon beasts outside cleaned up any corpses.”

“Hmm, that’s weird, isn’t it? The exam here is to get access to the tower’s archive, right? It wouldn’t make sense if the answer was something Shaula did *after* the tower was built. The answer would need to be something that happened earlier in the timeline.”

Catching the inconsistency in Shaula’s answer, Anastasia followed up.

True, if the answer to the question was from something that happened after the tower was being managed, then it would screw up the whole order of events. In which case the natural interpretation is that the ‘hero destroyed by Shaula’ comes from before the tower was built.

“So this is from before you were just wildly killing everyone who approached this place. Think back. Your memory is so bad because your breasts and bottom are absorbing all the nutrients, I suppose.”

“My mom picked this look for me. And even if you tell me to remember, I honestly can’t really think of anything. I mean, you’re asking about before this tower was made, right?

They gathered around Shaula, trying to jog her memory. Weighed down by all their expectations, Shaula just groaned. It looked like there was little hope this would lead to an answer.

"Assuming it's not a lie, she was around four hundred years ago, wasn't she? If we just list a bunch of famous people from back then, maybe she killed a couple of them?"

"What do you think I am, Master? I'm a gentle maiden who likes to nibble flowers."

"That's not a maiden; it's a caterpillar."

"Don't go too far, Subaru. If she doesn't want to remember, then we don't need to force her…"

"Your kindness is a virtue and insanely charming, but this woman's the type where the more you spoil her, the worse she'll get! I can tell! I'm the same way!"

This definitely isn't simply a matter of not wanting to remember. She just has a terrible memory. This is a delicate issue, since there are all sorts of problems that can come with repressed memories, but at least in her case, I don't believe it has anything to do with that.

"Still, though, even if we know the hero who was destroyed, how do we get the monoliths to accept it?"

"True, Natsuki. Even if we get that part, what is touching his greatest splendor?"

Given that passing or failing the examination came down to touching a monolith, the way to answer the question in the end was to touch the correct monolith. The problem was how to find the correct one and how to answer.

Is it really going to come down to thumbing through Shaula's memories?

"Buuuut we won't make any progress just thinking about it like this. The half naked lady is willing to help, so it should be fine to ask her for anything we can figure out, if you ask me."

Meili sounded fed up with the adults getting stuck going in circles at the very start of the problem. She was playing with Shaula's hair while looking disinterestedly at the monoliths.

"There aren't any cute demon beasts, and there's not any progress, so it isn't any fun here. Hurry up… I want to go back to the manor."

Everyone was at a loss for words at Meili's spoiled statement.

"What?" Meili adjusted her position as Subaru patted her head. "…What did I do?"

“Nothing. I was just thinking you were right. This place is covered in sand, and there are all sorts of crazy demon beasts outside. Let’s take care of everything, resolve all the problems… wake Rem up and find a way to help all the people who are in trouble, and then get out of here quick.”

Spinning our wheels and getting anxious without even trying anything is a waste of precious time. It feels like that is probably what whatever sadistic person set this exam wanted to happen.

“Master, Master. You know there’s actually a really easy head to pat right next to hers.”

“Like I said, I know you’re the type that goes bad when you’re spoiled. Starting now, I’m going full spartan on you.”

“Awwww.”

Shaula’s cheeks puffed out, and she started sulking in earnest. Though she would just forget about it and start humming again in under a minute, so she wasn’t too difficult to deal with.

“We have received a request from the young lady, so shall we at least try whatever possibilities are staring us in the face?”

“Yeah, that’s for the best. We can fail as many times as we want, so there’s no pressure. Most of the time in life you only get one chance, so this is mild compared to that.”

Thanks to Meili setting them in motion, Julius and Anastasia were in agreement, too.

Time to make Shaula remember whichever hero she destroyed.

“We’ll go with names we know… That’s a good starting point. So what about Reid, the first Sword Saint. Did you kill him?”

“Eeeeeeep!!!”

Shaula leaped back with a scream when Subaru tested out the first name that came to mind. Because of the sudden motion, Meili couldn’t hold on and started to fall.

“Watch out!”

Luckily, Subaru dove and caught her.

“Th-thanks, mister…”

“No problem. It seems like it was a little my fault, too… though…”

Carefully setting down Meili, Shaula had gotten smaller as she fled far in the distance.

“Was the first Sword Saint really that scary?”

“Not possible. He was the honored forefather of Reinhard and Sir Wilhelm’s Astrea lineage. There is no doubt when it comes to

the quality of either his swordsmanship or his good character. In the stories that have been passed down about him, he certainly seemed to have an unfettered, broadminded personality and certain quirks that diverge slightly from Reinhard and the others… But were he not of upstanding character, that would mean the history of the Astrea family to this day has become twisted."

"Okay, fair, but, at least for Japan, when you take a closer look at history, even skilled statesmen can look pretty terrible from different angles. Compared to that, I'd say this is a pretty mild sort of question…"

"Well, we won't make much progress by simply speculating. Let's have the woman who was a witness enlighten us. If you please…"

When Subaru imagined out loud what Reid might have been like based on Shaula's reaction, Julius went off on a long spiel. And to top it off, he even walked all over Subaru's attempts at managing expectations.

"Let us hear your impression of the first Sword Saint, Reid Astrea, Ms. Shaula. Allow me to ask your unreserved and honest opinion."

"He was an absolute trash human being."

"Allow me to ask your unreserved and honest opinion."

"Don't act like you didn't hear her!"

Subaru pointed at Shaula as Julius tried to ignore the inconvenient answer she had just given.

"There you go, listen. The true history you wanted to know is right there."

"…People of superior skill, be it greater or lesser, all have self-confidence. That is not something they should be blamed for. If anything, it is something to be proud of. For a man who left his name to history as the greatest swordsman of his time, that sort of behavior would be, well, considering the historical background, it is even suitable—"

"This is the first time I've seen you this desperate."

Julius was faltering, seemingly unconvinced himself.

Ignoring the man who seemed to be feeling a little bit let down at the truth of the history he had admired, Shaula continued sharing what kind of man Reid Astrea was.

"Well, basically, he was a terrible guy. A personality like a brat who just got bigger instead of growing up. And he loved bullying

weaklings. Though as far as that jerk was concerned, pretty much everyone was a weakling, so you could call it bullying the weak whenever he fought anyone. He totally wrecked me, too."

No matter how many hateful memories spilled out, the darkness in Shaula's demeanor did not fade. It was like a child who had been picked on recounting all the injustices their bully had perpetrated on them.

"I remember that jerk. It's only natural that you forget the things you do, but it's impossible to forget what was done to you…"

"If he could mistreat you, of all people, he must have been pretty monstrous. Either way, though, it looks like he's not the hero this question means, so save it for later."

"……Indeed. There are other things we should prioritize at the moment."

It was hard to say whether it was due to a purely scholarly interest or just his own personal interest, but Subaru had a feeling Julius would not be much use for a while.

He felt a bit bad that Julius's dreams had just been crushed, but they didn't have any reason to care much about Reinhard's ancestor at the moment. No matter how amazing the lineage might be, Reinhard was already more than amazing enough on his own, so Subaru considered that all just icing on the cake anyway. And at least when it came to the question of their fathers' characters, Subaru was confident he was more blessed than Reinhard.

"In which case, if we leave guessing random heroes to someone more knowledgeable about that topic…"

"Understood. Allow me to humbly accept that duty."

"I didn't say you yet, but sure, have at it. Beako, can you help him?"

"Very well."

Leaving the job to someone fired up for it was for the best. And as an assistant, Beatrice was a good fit with her four centuries worth of knowledge.

"Then what should we do?"

"Let's give the surroundings a more thorough search."

While Julius and Beatrice were pursuing the hero angle with Shaula, Subaru took a different approach. To start, he turned his eyes to the layout of the swarm of monoliths.

"They're scattered, but is there some method to the madness? The first one is right in front of the stairs."

“The one that gave the question.”

Though they weren’t particularly tightly spaced, Subaru took great care not to touch any monoliths as he, Emilia, and Anastasia began examining them.

They all are slightly different sizes, which might have something to do with it? We can’t touch them to measure the size precisely, but—

“At a glance…it looks like maybe seven or eight are around the same size as the first one?”

“Maybe? Yeah, I think so, too. The ones *reeeally* far away are all small, I think. Touching them will still restart the test.”

“Spoken like someone with experience… Ah, sorry, never mind.”

Emilia looked at him with sad eyes, so Subaru bit back his needless jab. Moving back in front of the first monolith, the three of them put their heads together.

“Great hero destroyed by Shaula, touch upon his grandest splendor… It feels like someone trying to sound epic.”

“It’s certainly an abstract sort of phrasing. But if this requires Shaula’s memories to solve it, then it’s a failure of a test, isn’t it?”

“I can’t really say I disagree.”

For something that calls itself an examination, if the solution requires relying on someone other than the exam taker—and not just someone else, but the person who is supposed to be managing the tower—then that’s totally unfair.

They were currently on friendly terms with Shaula, through no fault or effort of their own, and had managed to get into the tower without fighting her, but were it not for that, they could have easily been in for a brutal fight to the death. Even if they had succeeded, it was very possible they would’ve had to kill her just to gain access to this place.

“That would make it basically impossible to ever pass this examination.”

“If whoever set this up didn’t want to let anyone pass, then that would be one way. Putting a powerful guardian as a first line of defense and then making it so that the exam was impossible to clear if that guardian was defeated.”

“But you don’t think that’s what this is. Right?”

“Well, yeah.”

Subaru smiled wryly with a nod as Emilia stared at him with eyes filled with expectation.

It was Subaru's weak point. He had no defense against people like Emilia or Beatrice giving him that look. It was the same with Rem and Garfiel and Otto, too. And Petra and—there was no end to it if he really thought about it. Patlash and Ram were the only ones who didn't do it.

"Hmm. With a few notable exceptions, questions like this are generally designed to be solvable. If you really wanted to hide something, then it makes no sense to purposely give anyone a chance to find it."

"Right, so you're saying this is something different?"

"Shaula said this is a great library where we could find anything we wanted to know or discover, right? That doesn't sound like the sort of thing she would say off the top of her head. More like something she was told herself once. In which case it was her master who made this place and left it in Shaula's care. In other words, her master intended for it to serve as a library from the beginning."

And the more Subaru tugged the thread of that possibility, the more their current situation felt unnatural.

The creator of the Great Pleiades Library must have intended for it to be used. That explained the examination and Shaula's watch.

"So from the start, it's something only people who can get along with Shaula can use?"

"But Shaula was told to take out everyone who approaches the tower."

—Right. Shaula was under strict orders to erase everyone who approached the tower without exception. Us being on good terms with her is a complete coincidence.

It's way too limiting to assume that anyone who doesn't luck into those exact circumstances isn't allowed to challenge this tower.

"If that was it, then the requirements are strength, luck, and the charm to get on Shaula's good side? That's pretty unreasonable, if you ask me."

"…Yeah…"

Not being able to beat Shaula or kill her, or failing to get her help, all mean losing the right to challenge the Great Pleiades Library.

It's not exactly logical, but that seems like the only conclusion from what we know so far.

But Subaru could not bring himself to just accept that, either.

“Mm. Hmm.”

“Emilia-tan?”

“There is something that *reeeally* bothers me. It might not have anything to do with anything, but…”

“If something’s bothering you, just say it. It’s not like my theories are guaranteed to be right, and coming at it from different angles is generally a good idea.”

“Really? In that case…this examination really feels a lot like the trials.”

Subaru and Anastasia both went quiet at that. For different reasons, though. Anastasia because she did not understand the comparison, and Subaru because he did.

“Getting in my way again, Echidna…”

“I don’t think Echidna has anything to do with this examination… But you *reeeally* seem to hate her.”

“If you ever meet someone who seems like a savior only for them to turn out to be the mastermind behind it all, you’ll end up like me, too.”

Ever since the events at the Sanctuary, Emilia and Subaru had only talked about the Witch once or twice. And when he brought up the content of the trials, Emilia struggled to answer, so he had refrained from probing any further.

The one thing they both shared about it was that “Echidna is an evil, sadistic bitch.” Emilia had a more roundabout, polite way of saying it, but that was exactly how Subaru put it.

I noticed it when the examination was first brought up, but especially once the test started, it felt like the trials. So maybe a part of the system, or even a big piece of it, is the same as that tomb.

“Thinking back, the trials could be attempted an unlimited number of times, too.”

“And the examinations here are for the third, second, and first floors, so there are three of them, too.”

Subaru and Emilia looked at each other, realizing the similarities were piling up.

The existence of the Sage and a four-century time span. Naturally thinking about that brought the witches to mind, too. What were the odds that they had no connection at all?

“Yeah, but even knowing that much isn’t going to give us an answer here.”

Emilia quickly stopped that line of thought. Even if her hunch

was right and there was a connection between the tomb and their current situation, it had little to do with the question they needed to answer.

And we still have to ask Shaula the name of whichever hero she destroyed—

"…Or maybe not?"

"If we assume this is something that is supposed to be solvable, then it can't be done without Shaula. But what if that thought itself is wrong?"

This is the Sage's tower; that was the Witch's tomb. If there is a shared point between the two of them, other than the sadism of the people setting the tests, it's that there is a margin of thought possible.

The Witch tested people through her Trials, but she didn't set a challenge that was impossible. So if the Sage is testing people through these examinations, too, the challenge shouldn't be impossible, either.

"There's a chance we can clear this tower without Shaula…"

"If you've thought of something, Natsuki, then—"

"Shh."

Seeing Subaru slip into thought, Anastasia started to say something before Emilia stopped her.

Putting her finger to her lips to silence Anastasia, Emilia looked at Subaru, her eyes filling with confidence. Subaru hadn't even noticed what had transpired; his brain was already in high gear.

Anyone facing this test likely had to get through Shaula to enter the tower. Her presence can't be crucial to passing this.

"We mistakenly believed that Shaula was responsible for Flugel's achievements. The Sage's greatest accomplishment is sealing the Witch together with his comrades. But the Witch of Jealousy would never be called a hero, and she wasn't destroyed, either."

I can discard the possibility that our priors are mistaken with that. There's a chance that there was some other hero's tale that Sage Flugel pinned on Shaula, but if that's the case, it's weird neither Julius nor Beatrice have thought of it already.

And inevitably, another potential explanation rose to the surface.

"What if there's a Shaula that Shaula doesn't know about?"

They had brought up that possibility earlier in a different situation.

Subaru's thoughts weren't becoming circular, though. It was the

opposite. Discarding one hypothesis became evidence pointing toward another, which was that—

"Beako! Can you come here a sec?"

Julius was talking with Shaula, desperately struggling to pry open the door of her memories together with Beatrice. When she heard Subaru's shout, her ears perked up.

"Betty likes the look on your face."

"Don't you always like it?"

"This time is especially good."

Subaru held out his hand to her as she said that without any shame. Beatrice took his hand and looked at him with her cute, round blue eyes. They made it clear she was asking him what she should do.

Subaru nodded and said, "It's simple—I want to jump high up for a bit using Murak."

"…Don't tell Betty you've given up and are trying to break through the ceiling."

"Don't sound so exasperated. Of course not. I want to be able to look down at the monoliths from above."

"Look down at the monolith…"

Behind Subaru, Emilia murmured as she looked back at the monolith.

Beatrice did not understand the reason, but she did not ask anything else. Exhaling slightly, she pulled Subaru's hand closer, tighter.

"Murak."

A faint light purple surged in reply to Beatrice's incantation and shrouded Subaru's body. It was a spell that dampened the effects of gravity and sharply enhanced agility. A light hop was enough to go up a yard in the air, and a full-strength jump—

"Here…we…go!"

Still holding Beatrice's hand, Subaru's body leaped high. He was around six or seven yards up, but his body did not crash into the ceiling that should have been there.

It was as if the ceiling simply didn't exist in the infinite white space, like the whole floor of the tower had been expanded. Because of that, Subaru could look down at the entire room from above.

"Just like I thought."

"Did you get what you wanted?"

“Yep. This is the worst kind of terrible.”

Subaru’s cheeks twisted as he nodded at Beatrice’s question. Falling gently, Subaru carried Beatrice like a princess all the way down.

“I know the hero’s name.”

“Really?!”

Subaru shared his confidence to Emilia, who had watched his leap from start to finish. Emilia was stunned, and Anastasia’s eyes widened.

“I’m not going to doubt you now, but…how did you get the answer, Natsuki?”

“It’s nothing that special. You guys not managing to solve it isn’t because you were bad or missed something. There are hardly any people who have a chance of answering it.”

That was why he had said it was the worst kind of terrible.

Making it past the obstacle of Shaula, understanding the actual contents of the question, and just the fundamental ability to know the answer, between all of that, the people who could do it were already badly limited.

“The hero destroyed by Shaula? His name is Orion.”

“Orion…?”

Everyone looked at Shaula with a dubious look when Subaru said that name. But Shaula herself shook her head vigorously.

“Never heard of the guy! Seriously, I don’t know who you’re talkin’ about. Even if I did kill him, anyone who didn’t make it here can’t be a hero, right? So it’s not my fault. How do you like that defense?! I’m smart!”

“Which is exactly why we suspected this obviously not-so-smart person might have simply forgotten, but it’s not that, either. The Shaula in question isn’t talking about her in the first place.”

“I’m the only Shaula! It’s the name I got from Master!”

“I’m saying there was a story behind the name your master gave you.”

Putting his finger on Shaula’s nose, Subaru pushed her back as she tried to argue. And then Subaru walked over in front of the first monolith.

“The origin of the name Shaula… Is that another thing that only you know?”

“It’s not just me. But back where I’m from, there is a star called Shaula. It means needle, but it’s not just any needle. It’s a scorpion’s tail.”

She insisted that her hairstyle was a scorpiontail. Whether that was a hint or just her natural airheadedness is up for debate, but either way, there were a couple of things to link Shaula, scorpion, and needle together.

“According to legend, the great hero Orion was getting full of himself, so the gods chose a scorpion to deal with him. Once it jabbed him, he died and transformed into stars in the sky. And for its achievement, the scorpion was also turned into a constellation. It’s said that even now, Orion is afraid of the scorpion and runs away from it in the night sky…”

“When Subaru breaks it down so much, even a heroic tale ends up sounding disappointing,” Beatrice quipped.

“Anyway, there’s this concept of constellations, images of people or animals or whatever traced by the stars. They’re also called asterisms. And so, if you look down at the monoliths from above…”

That was why he had used Beatrice’s magic to lighten his body to reach that critical vantage point.

The black points of the monoliths in a sea of white—ordinarily, the colors would have been flipped, but the black stars in the white world connected, forming an asterism that Subaru knew well.

There were seven other monoliths the same size as the original one, for a total of eight.

The number and distribution of them matched the main stars of the constellation of Orion. And if that connected with the “touch upon his greatest splendor”…

“The first monolith is in the center. Basically around where Alnilam would be. So if we trace out the constellation from there,

then…”

“Then?”

“Grandest splendor is a bit of a trick question. The truth is stars have a different way of shining. Some are just constantly bright, but others flicker. Because of that, depending on how you look at it, there are two most splendorous stars in Orion…”

When looking at it from above, there was Betelgeuse in the upper left, Orion’s right shoulder, and Rigel in the lower right, Orion’s left leg.

Rigel was constant, but Betelgeuse had a variable light.

Answering both wasn’t a clean solution to the problem, but—

“If it was me, I would choose Rigel.”

Betelgeuse brought to mind unpleasant memories of someone with a similar-sounding name.

So Subaru touched the monolith that represented Rigel.

“

“R-really? I just think it’s great that you know so much.”

“The issue isn’t about how much I know, but that anyone who wasn’t like me would never be able to solve it. That’s the problem.”

Subaru scratched his head, but Emilia just looked confused.

He tried to think of how to explain it, but getting into the details would be a bit dangerous, too.

The examination had been a test about the constellation Orion and the myth behind it. *I would love to be able to just complain about whatever the hell the person who thought this up was thinking like I’m smart for knowing the answer, but the main problem is that it’s impossible to learn about the constellation Orion in this world*.

The constellation Orion, the star Shaula, and how the constellations aligned were all bits of knowledge from the world Subaru had come from.

Which meant whoever designed the test knew the same night sky as Subaru.

Or more bluntly, the person who designed a question that could only be answered by someone who knew a lot of trivia about the night sky in a different universe is a completely twisted asshole. And at present, the likeliest candidate is Sage Flugel.

“Your master has a really nasty personality from the looks of it.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, what are you saying? It’s not like you to dunk on yourself! Can’t really argue with the nasty bit, but at least there’s some compassion in it being solvable! Reid would definitely give an impossible problem…like leave a clone of himself and not let anyone through who couldn’t beat him.”

“That’s a scary thought, too, but I’m not sure which is actually more difficult to solve.”

Either way, it was looking a lot like the heroes who defeated the Witch of Envy in the past all had personality issues. Considering that, it might actually be better if knowledge of a different universe was the only thing being tested.

“Still, though, there sure are a lot of books here.”

Ignoring their little post-test review, Anastasia examined the bookshelves surrounding them. Petting the fur of her scarf, she stared at a shelf filled with books.

“We made it through the examination thanks to your great work. That’s all well and good, but what is the role of this archive? What sorts of books are kept here?”

“According to Ms. Shaula’s explanation, it is a treasure trove of knowledge, but…”

“Judging by her reaction, this is probably the first time Taygeta has ever been opened. There’s nothing to do but look around ourselves, I suppose.”

“I guess so… You seem in awfully high spirits.”

“That’s… Well, maybe a little.”

Moving beside Subaru and grabbing his sleeve, Beatrice was speaking faster than usual. There was a bit of a gleam in her eyes as she looked around with great interest at the archive that lay before her. Realizing why, Subaru found it charming despite the situation.

“I had assumed you didn’t have any good memories about the forbidden archive.”

“…It’s true they were not all good memories. But whatever else it was, it was also the place that Betty spent four hundred years. And also…”

“Also?”

“It is where you told Betty to choose you. It’s not a place Betty could forget even if she tried.”

“You’re a cutie.”

“Mrgh!”

As affection welled inside him, Subaru stroked the top of her head. Beatrice let out a feline cry of satisfaction before quickly taking off to tear through the shelves of books.

With the examination complete and the monoliths gone, the third floor had appeared as a single circular floor. Structurally, it was an extension of the lower floors, and the way it had seemed to go on forever was just an optical illusion.

The space was filled with densely packed shelves upon shelves. The archive of forbidden books had hosted quite a sizable collection, but it did not even begin to compare to what lay before them.

“I’d love a computer index to find the book we’re looking for.”

“Betty knew exactly where everything in the archive was.”

“You’re something. Are you a genius?”

Amazed by Beatrice’s private pride, Subaru moved over to a nearby bookshelf. Looking around, Emilia and the others were walking toward various shelves, but they did not seem ready to reach out and pick up a book.

“You were the one who solved it, right? So is it okay for anyone

else to touch them?"

"Ah, right, I don't really know. But if only the person who answered it can read them, then it would be weird for people who just watched it being solved to be in here at all, wouldn't it?"

"Ah. True. I guess us being allowed in would mean we probably have permission."

"I would think so, but…Emilia-tan?!"

Fully convinced by that explanation, Emilia pulled a book off the shelf in front of her. And before Subaru could say anything else, she started flipping through it.

"Mmm, it's a normal book…I think. What is it, Subaru?"

"Nothing, I literally fell in love with her all over again after that crazy courage… I know I said it, but that was *just* me saying it."

"—? As long as you say it's true, then it's fine, right? What? Did I say something strange?"

Emilia looked genuinely confused, leaving Subaru speechless. He covered his face with his hand, gripped by a difficult-to-express emotion as he groaned.

"This is what you have built up. And it's true that you solved the riddle of Taygeta that none of us could answer. There should be no denying that achievement."

"That was just a random shot in the dark. It just happened to be me is all."

Julius shrugged at his bewilderment, but Subaru looked away from the knight.

Emilia's trust, Beatrice's affection, Julius's sincerity—they were all things that Subaru wanted to have, but when he actually had them, the sense that something was wrong about it still refused to fade.

Subaru was always doubting whether he really deserved to have any of it.

"Emilia's right, it's just a normal book. There don't seem to be any scary traps, either."

"The book is made of…hard to say. I can't tell how old it is, either. As for what's written in it…?"

Emilia had a proactive, poison-tester approach, and seeing that, others reached out and picked up a book, too. But the world was not such a simple place that they could learn everything from just one or two books.

"What is it, Beako?"

“At a glance, it looks like the books are all the same size. But the titles are all different. This one is Noah Libertas, this one is Aegon Voller… The ordering does not make sense, either.”

Perhaps it was the itch of her librarian blood, but Beatrice wasn’t happy with how the books had been seemingly randomly organized. As far as Subaru could remember, the forbidden archive had not been that neat, but maybe it had been organized in some way.

Setting aside her indignation, Subaru noticed something while looking at the spines of the books.

“The book titles… Are they all people’s names?”

“Hmm… It appears so. This is Palma Eure, and here is Coyote.”

“They are all unfamiliar names. I cannot claim the greatest discernment, but as far as I am aware, these are not names I’ve encountered before. Of course, if I properly look around at everything, it might be different, but…”

“If you don’t know them, then I doubt anyone does.”

Julius, who has been really letting his history nerd flag fly lately, doesn’t know them. In which case, maybe they’re not people’s names?

Subaru grabbed a book from the shelf himself, but the spiral lettering was the usual combination of scripts for this world’s language.

“Just to be sure, have you seen any names you recognize, Anastasia?”

“—Mmmm, nope.”

Using that pretext, Subaru checked with Foxidna, too. As an artificial spirit, it was entirely possible she might know more than Julius. But that hope was dashed, and there was no reason for her to lie unless she had completely turned against them.

“It’s too soon to quit, though. The best place to hide a tree is in a forest… Maybe the books packed with all sorts of knowledge are hidden away, buried in the shelves. Though that would be a massive pain.”

“Don’t give up so easily. It’s a lot more constructive than solving an impossible riddle, isn’t it? We have to try!”

Faced with a massive wall of books, Emilia clenched her little fists and fired herself up.

And, as if her fist pump bore fruit, when Subaru looked back at the shelves and traced out a title with his finger, he noticed something.

While tracing it out, Subaru's finger suddenly stopped. Hooking the top of the spine with his finger and tilting, he slipped it off the shelf. The book's title was a name that he knew.

"

“—Executioner.”

At a young age, she had seen how her father conducted himself at the execution grounds.

The horrifically cruel actions, the dying throes of sinners losing their lives, the blood and death that filled the execution grounds.

—And the reason she was shown so much death was because none other than her father willed it.

To show that crimes are punished, that evil was fittingly rewarded.

Her father had tried to convey the faith in good and evil that he as an executioner believed in.

Her father’s intent was surely a noble one. His ideals were lofty.

However, considering the woman’s age, it was also self-righteous, and it was too soon to demand such ideals of her.

Having watched many people go to their deaths, she’d had the stench of blood and the sight of criminals being punished etched into her mind.

As a result, she learned the appropriate punishment for sin before she ever learned the sanctity of life or the natural order of life and death.

Good deeds begot good karma while evil deeds begot evil karma, corrupting the souls of sinners until they were fit to be punished.

With a firm understanding of her father’s teachings, she sought punishments to fit crimes. And so she desired a compass to guide herself, a scale of righteousness by which she could judge evil deeds as evil.

“

“

criminals who have been punished.

Stepping over the broken fragments of people, including her father, who was the last, the woman set off to fulfill the task she had set for herself. She left in search of crimes worthy of punishment.

—The Witch of Pride queried sins, delivered punishments, and continued to judge criminals.

5

Agony racked Subaru as he regained consciousness after learning the origin of a Witch he had met once before.

“Gaahhh!”

It was like his consciousness was being audibly pulled back out of the book. Consumed by the feeling of sticky dried blood clinging to him, it was a ripping feeling that paid no heed to outer layers being peeled away in the process.

The pain wasn’t in his head or his body. It was in his soul.

His soul had been pulled into the book, and the pain came from tearing it back out.

“Subaru!”

Emilia’s voice rang out from beside him as the book slipped from his hand. It landed upside down and splayed across the ground as she steadied his shoulder.

“Y-yeah…?”

“A-are you okay? You sounded *reeeally* hurt just now…”

“Y-yeah, I managed not to get torn away…I think? I am here, right?”

Clenching his chest as his heart pounded furiously, Subaru took several deep breaths. His eyes were looking all around before finally stopping at Emilia.

“Ah, seeing your face is a relief. Just let me rest on your shoulder a bit more.”

“That’s fine, but what happened?”

Accepting his request, she continued to support him. Listening to that, Beatrice moved to pick up the book that had fallen to the floor.

“He had a strange look on his face when he touched this—”

“Wait, Beatrice! Don’t touch it!”

Subaru tried to stop her from picking up the book, but before he could say anything, she had already lifted it up. She had not looked inside it yet, but she furrowed her brow at Subaru's warning as she read the title.

"—Typhon. Is that a name you know, Subaru?"

"Yeah… Don't you…?"

Subaru stopped himself before finishing the rest of the question. But she did not answer in the affirmative or the negative. She looked at a loss, her expression clouding in confusion at what Subaru had said. Meanwhile, she opened the book and looked at the pages.

"Don't!"

"What a rude thing to say. It is not any different from any of the other books, I suppose."

He was afraid she would be hit by the same shock that had struck him, but she didn't have any particular reaction to the contents of the book. It was the same as the rest to her.

"But it was not the same as any other book to you, I suppose…"

"…Yeah. But why just me?"

"Could it be like the problem before where only you could understand it? Or maybe the effect only applies to you because you solved the problem…?"

"If so, then this is just getting nastier and nastier…"

Subaru had a bad feeling as he shook his head.

—What had appeared in his mind, what he had experienced, was that woman's memories in vivid, terrifyingly rich detail.

The smell, the taste, the feeling, and the weight of all the lives shattered.

Subaru felt like it was a miracle he had made it back after experiencing someone else's memories so intensely. It seemed all too possible he could've gotten swallowed up in someone else's life. He had felt that fear and revulsion in the experience just then.

"Subaru, who is this Typhon?"

"It's a bit hard to explain… No, I guess maybe it wouldn't be so hard to explain to you? If you don't know the name, then I guess you didn't meet her, but she was in the tomb."

Emilia and Beatrice both froze in shock at that.

"Typhon was one of the Witches who existed in the past. The Witch of Pride. She's a tyke, sort of like Beako, but with tanned skin. She was like the embodiment of the innocent cruelty of kids."

Emilia and Beatrice both shook their heads, not having any idea who he was describing.

I guess that Witch's Tea Party was a special show just for me. Even if it was all for her own purposes, she really pulled out all the stops.

"Innocent cruelty, huh…"

When he described that, he reflexively remembered the Typhon he had spent that little bit of time with. Even if it was in a weird spirit realm, it was hard to forget how she had broken his arms and legs. Even though they had immediately been healed, the shock of losing all four limbs wasn't something that faded away.

But it felt like he had touched on a little fragment of her aberrant nature after that "reading session." Of course, that didn't mean he could suddenly understand her way of thinking.

"Either way, when I read the book just now, I saw this Typhon girl's…memories? Life? Roots? Living it vicariously or something like that. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, though."

"Vicariously experiencing people's memories? That feels more and more like the trials in the tomb."

"That time, it was a head-on showdown with your memories, though. I mean, it was obviously no trouble at all there."

"R-right, no trouble."

Conveniently ignoring the episodes of bawling and mental breakdowns after facing the challenges over and over again, Subaru and Emilia simply nodded.

"Setting aside for the moment the two of you acting tough, this is a book that allows the reader to vicariously experience others' memories. In other words, it is a way to retrace the past. That must mean the library allows visitors to learn what they wish to know—"

Beatrice was deep in thought about what had happened to Subaru, but before she could finish, there was another shout.

"—Agh."

The groan came from the shelf where Julius and Anastasia were investigating. Looking over, they saw Julius kneeling on the ground with a book in his hand.

Close behind him, Anastasia looked stunned as she shook his shoulder before pulling the book away.

"Julius? Julius, get a hold of yourself! Can you hear me?"

"Lady…Anastasia…"

"There we go. Take deep breaths. Are you all right?"

Looking similar to Subaru just moments earlier, Julius's

consciousness returned to reality. Anastasia had a look of relief on her face. Even exhausted, he looked like a figure from a painting.

"Whoa there, overheating after reading too many difficult books? I get it, but…owwwww."

"Don't tease people on instinct. Julius, are you really okay?"

Emilia gently but firmly pulled Subaru's ear as he started to taunt Julius. His face was slightly pale as he shook his head at Emilia's caring words.

"My humblest apologies for worrying you. I'm ashamed of myself for such a dramatic reaction… However, it truly was an experience that was bad for the heart."

Julius elegantly answered Emilia while hiding his worry. However, he could not hide the cold sweat that had appeared on his brow. Anastasia gently wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

"It's a boy's natural instinct to act tough, so there's no helping it, I suppose, but there's nothing wrong with saying you're hurting. Forcing yourself until you can't take it anymore just causes problems for everyone else, too."

"Yes, Lady Anastasia. Thank you for your concern."

"Mm-hmm, Anastasia is exactly right, Subaru."

"I don't know why you are reminding me, but yes, she is!"

With both camp leaders and their knights having finished that little interlude, the focus turned to the book in Anastasia's arms. The one that Julius had looked at and probably experienced the same sort of thing as Subaru had. Looking at the spine, Subaru saw that the title was—

"—Balleroy Temeglyph. Do you know the name?"

"I've never heard it. Pretty sure."

Emilia glanced at Subaru after reading it, but Subaru shook his head. And despite everything else, he had confidence in his memory. He remembered everyone he had met, from Earlham Village to the fruit merchant in the capital.

"I've heard the name before. If I remember correctly… Right, one of the Volakian Empire's generals was named that, I think?"

"—More precisely, a former general."

Julius supplemented Anastasia's vague memory. That was enough to tell that it was someone Julius had some connection with.

"But Volakia is to the south, right? You know a general from there?"

“Former general. It is not so shocking a thing, is it? I am a member of the royal guard. The Kingdom of Lugunica and the Empire of Volakia are neighboring countries, so there were plenty of chances for me to know the name of a general in their army.”

“I see, so a one-sided acquaintance, then.”

Subaru’s eyes narrowed, and he nodded at that explanation. Glancing at Anastasia, he took the Balleroy book from her hands. And hesitating for just a moment, he opened it.

However—

“I know the guy indirectly now, too, and I tried to read it, but nothing happened.”

“…Subaru…”

“What matters between all of us right now is trust, right? If you asked whether we trusted each other, I wouldn’t have said no…or was that just me?”

“—That is an unfair thing to say.”

Julius averted his eyes as Subaru leveled a pointed look at him.

“Other than the people here, there is no one I can place my trust in. You and Lady Anastasia support me mentally in a way that even Reinhard does not.”

“…I feel a little sick hearing it put that way.”

“It did not feel pleasant rolling off my lips, either.”

Subaru rubbed his nose and Julius touched his hair while closing his eyes. He sighed, then bowed to Anastasia and Emilia.

“Allow me to offer an apology, Lady Anastasia, Lady Emilia. I allowed a trivial personal feeling to seep into my answer. It was an unforgivable, self-interested action when I should have shared the contents of the book.”

“Whether we can forgive it or not is up to me and Emilia, so what do you think?”

“Subaru and Anastasia mostly covered what I was going to mention. ‘So what?’ is all I have to say now, I think.”

Emilia and Anastasia easily accepted his apology, and Julius bowed deeply one last time. People who do something wrong and go all out in their apology react strongly when they’re forgiven. It was a feeling Subaru had experienced plenty of times, so it was something he was intimately familiar with.

But while Subaru was watching that unfold, Julius slowly started to speak. It almost seemed like peeling off a scab that had almost finished healing.

“—Balleroy Temeglyph. In the Volakian Empire, which is known for its ruthless meritocracy, there are nine generals who are considered the country’s strongest warriors, the Nine Divine Generals. And he was one of that nine.”

“Nine Divine Generals… That’s a pretty intense title. I don’t hate that naming sense, though.”

“All of them are peerless warriors. In terms of pure strength on a national level, the Volakian Empire is an equal match to the Kingdom of Lugunica, or possibly even stronger. In military terms, excepting the Covenant with the Divine Dragon and the existence of Reinhard, our kingdom would be hard-pressed in a battle against them.”

“It seems a little strange to immediately assume there’d be a fight…”

Subaru scratched his cheek while quietly filing Julius’s fighting strength estimate away in his head.

Thinking again about it, Subaru did not really know much about the situation in any country other than Lugunica—

“So if you’re talking about this Balleroy guy in the past tense, then…”

“Yes, he has passed. He was both a man possessed of rare strength, a noble warrior, and a master worthy of respect. And the one who took his life…was none other than I.”

Julius had a clouded expression as he spoke of the final moment of a foreign country’s general.

“You took the life of a general…of another country even. That’s a pretty surprising story.”

“Lady Anastasia, you… No, indeed, you would not remember now.”

Julius looked down as Anastasia reacted as if hearing it for the first time.

From his reaction, it was probably something he had shared with Anastasia before he had been erased from her memories and before Foxidna had taken over.

“Um, if the book I studied is correct, aren’t Lugunica and Volakia on reeeally bad terms, though…”

“Wouldn’t you killing a general of theirs lead to a war?”

Julius nodded, looking a little bit relieved at their honest, simple doubt.

“It was the result of a rather complicated situation. It was

something that Reinhard and Ferris were involved with, too, but… put simply, the former general was plotting a coup d'état of the empire. The reason I ended up having an audience with him was because I happened to be staying in the Volakian Empire at the time it was happening."

"Those two, too, huh? Wait, wasn't Reinhard not allowed to be exported?"

"A special dispensation was granted. The Volakian emperor wished to meet him… And even for you, using the word export there is rather inappropriate, don't you think?"

"I just couldn't think of the word on the spot. What should I have used, smuggled?"

It fit in the sense of taking something out of the country that wasn't supposed to be taken out.

Having experienced anew just how unbelievable Reinhard was in Pristella, it was not hard to imagine the nightmare any military force would have to deal with if Reinhard was in their country.

Subaru could understand why they had treaties basically banning him from getting too close to the border.

"Anyway, this former general's name was Balleroy Temeglyph. And as a result of our duel, I survived, as you can see, but it was a hard-fought affair. Even a single misstep, and our positions would surely have been reversed… He was a person whose loss was deeply felt."

"You are putting him on a pretty high pedestal there. This is someone who planned a coup and then failed, right?"

"I did not ask the details of the situation. However, having crossed swords with him, I am quite sure that he did not participate in a coup out of desire for personal gain or profit."

The forcefulness of that argument was proof enough that he had become a lingering sore point for Julius.

And because he could feel that, Subaru cocked his head.

"I understand that you've acknowledged him. But in that case, and I don't really know how to put this but…I can't imagine he would be happy knowing that the person who beat him felt the way you do."

"How do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said."

Considering Julius's personality, it was natural he would want to praise an opponent who was truly powerful, but if that opponent

really was a warrior, then all the more so, the results of the battle decided everything.

"I'm sure he would feel better if the person who beat him was just proud of winning instead of qualifying the victory with all sorts of excuses. Though for my purposes, I can't really ignore the fact that if you had lost back then, I wouldn't have been turned into a punching bag in front of a big crowd when the selection started."

"…If that had happened, Reinhard would have taken the role of pummeling you in the training yard."

"He would have annihilated me!"

Julius finally broke into a slight smile. Satisfied with that, Subaru fell silent and shrugged as Julius picked up where he left off.

"We've gotten a little off track. That is the connection between Sir Balleroy and I. Apologies. As a rule, it is an event that is forbidden to be discussed publicly, but it is also a difficult memory for me."

"That definitely isn't the sort of thing anyone should be spreading around. Okay. I'll keep my lips zipped."

"Mm-hmm. I understand. I'll also keep my lips…zipped?"

With Julius's explanation, Subaru and Emilia both agreed to keep it secret. And with the identity of the person whose memories Julius had experienced now known…

"Betty thinks she understands now. The books here allow people who know the person to experience said person's memories vicariously."

"Mine was a Witch, and Julius's was a former general? That sounds believable."

"I think I heard a word there that needs a bit more explanation, Natsuki. Are you friends with a Witch? Considering your circle of friends, you're totally a Witch Cultist, aren't you?"

"I'm pretty scared myself, but my character isn't that over-the-top. I'm more worried about my painful lack of distinguishing traits."

Subaru shrugged in resignation. Reacting to his response, Emilia, Beatrice, and even Julius all looked like they had bitten into something sour.

"Anyway, we at least understand the general design of the books in this archive. Now that we have that figured out, can I bring up something scary?"

“I don’t really want to hear it, but what?”

“The books in this archive… They all have people’s names written on them, right?”

Anastasia pointed at the two books titled Balleroy and Typhon. Subaru looked at them, afraid to hear what was coming next as he nodded.

“Right.”

“That imperial general and Natsuki’s witchy friend’s books—”

“She isn’t my friend.”

“—his witchy friend’s book is here. That means there are books for people who have passed.”

I’m not sure whether Typhon should really be classed as deceased, but since the tomb where the tea party was held is gone now, I guess she should be completely dead.

I can’t be so sure about Echidna considering how many question marks there still are surrounding Foxidna.

Despite that one little hangnail in the back of his mind, though, Anastasia raised her hands and gestured all around the room.

“Doesn’t that probably mean there’s books for people from all around the world and from the distant past up to now? If that’s true…finding the book of whoever we’re looking for… How long is that going to take?”

Subaru looked at the endless shelves of books Anastasia was gesturing toward, and he had a thought.

I take it back. The guy who created this tower isn’t the worst.

—He’s the absolute worst.

CHAPTER 3

THE TAYGETA ARCHIVE

1

“Still, this is really too much,” Meili murmured as she looked around the bookshelves while playing with her braided hair.

Subaru turned away from the shelf he had been looking at.

“Why? Now that we figured out the trick, has it piqued your interest?”

“Hard to say…but the more dead people you know, the more books you can read, right? That might be a pretty good fit for me.”

“

who've been around since this tower was made?"

"No clue. Even if it was just since the tower was built, that would mean around four hundred years' worth of records…of books of the dead. There's no way we can get through all of them."

Even just skimming the titles would take a massive amount of time.

Ever since Subaru and Julius both found hits, the group had yet to pull any more. It was a testament to the sheer scale of four hundred years of history.

"I don't necessarily mind not having to go through that again…"

"Don't complain so much. Beatrice and Big Sister will worry if they hear you. And what will that half naked lady think?"

"Don't make it sound like I've got a ton of love interests… I mean, I can't completely deny it, either, but just for appearance's sake, I'm going to. And about Shaula…"

Subaru shrugged before glancing over at Shaula. A little ways away, Julius and Anastasia were interrogating her. The moment she noticed Subaru's gaze, her eyes gleamed, and she blew him a kiss. He went out of his way to brush it aside.

"Heh-heh… You're a bad man, mister."

"For some reason, hearing that from you hurts even more than hearing it from Ram or Anastasia."

Having a little girl thinking the worst of him hit home a teeny bit harder. Feeling a dull ache in his chest, Subaru scratched his head.

"Hey, the timing is a bit strange, but can I ask you about something?"

"Ehhh? …Don't you have enough girls already, mister?"

"You've got it all wrong! It's not like that!"

"Just kidding… If you want to ask something, then just go ahead and ask."

Cocking her head, Meili's eyes narrowed coquettishly. There was an air about her that was almost alluring.

"If you say so, then here goes nothing… When did you become a killer?"

"—Bwah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Eh?! What?! Why are you laughing at that?"

He had tried to ask it with as much solemnity as he could muster, but the way she burst out laughing left Subaru bewildered.

Meili wiped the tears from her eyes before she answered.

"Sorry, it just seemed like a question you maybe should have asked sooner. I mean, I've been at your mansion for like a year now, right? How did you not care about that until after we came to this sandy tower?"

"I guess when you put it that way… So I shouldn't have just been giving you plushies?"

"You know, it's *because* you gave me presents that I like you, mister. Hee-hee."

Putting her hand to her mouth, Meili's eyes were playful as she looked at Subaru.

She had a point. It was terribly late to be wondering that now. The only reason Subaru had thought of it then was because they were in an archive filled with the memories of the dead.

Because the feeling of death is undeniably all around us here…

"I just forgot about it until we started poking around in a place like this…"

"You forgot?"

"For the past year, you've been in the girl-playing-with-dolls category, is all. I don't think I'm the only one who sees you that way, either."

"

“I think everyone is doing their best to make sure you and Big Sister…especially her…can stay how you are.”

Subaru nodded at Meili’s analysis as she hugged her legs and rested her chin on her knees.

Acting to protect Emilia. That was Subaru’s duty as her knight, but everyone in their camp shared that feeling in their heart in some form.

Subaru had intended to pay better attention to that, but with these sorts of things, he was always a step behind the more perceptive people in the group. He wouldn’t have guessed that included Petra, too.

Let Emilia be Emilia. While they weren’t overprotective about it, that was what everyone in their group wanted.

“…I started working five or six years ago.”

“…You’re willing to talk about it?”

“I was the one who said just ask if you wanted to know something. It’s not like I’m dead set on hiding it.”

Meili titled her head, her blue hair slipping from her shoulders as she looked a little bit exasperated. The way her braid swayed caught Subaru’s eyes as she started to elaborate matter-of-factly.

“Like I said before, in my case it was more like obeying Mama than doing a job. She was really, really scary if you didn’t do as she said.”

“Mama, huh?”

Subaru understood that Meili didn’t mean her actual mother. In one sense, she was a bit like a foster mother maybe, but as far as Subaru was concerned, she was the mother of the distortions in Meili’s character and didn’t deserve any amount of respect.

Using terror to force a young girl like her to carry out orders and mold her into a killer…

“She knew from the start that I could make demon beasts listen to me, so that part wasn’t an issue. That was why she picked me up in the first place.”

“Wait a sec. Picked you up? So then…”

“—? Ah, yeah, I was abandoned. I was thrown away in a forest before I could remember anything and raised by demon beasts.”

She was talking like it wasn’t worth noting, but it was quite the shocking story. Being raised by demon beasts as a baby…

“It’s not really the time to be commenting about actually getting raised by wolves. Also, can demon beasts even raise a

baby?”

“It would be impossible for a normal kid. But I had the ability to get along with demon beasts from birth… That was why I was apparently saved.”

Meili stopped there for a moment as Subaru looked speechless.

“Well, anyway, this blessing is probably why I was abandoned, too… So it’s hard to say if it was good or bad. Heh-heh.”

“Meili…”

“Hmm? Was that not funny? I thought that would get a laugh.”

Meili feigned looking hurt as Subaru struggled with what to even say to her. Should he stick to the sorrowful look or was it the moment for a little black humor?

In any event, Subaru’s heart wasn’t armored enough to choose the latter.

“Don’t look like that, mister. It doesn’t bother me at all.”

“It doesn’t…?”

“Lots of people born with blessings suffer. Mister advisor and the fanged mister, too… I’m sure they would understand.”

She brought up Otto and Garfiel as two examples of the hardships that were unavoidable for people born with blessings.

Otto had said something similar before, too. Even blessings that might seem convenient at a glance caused untold difficulties that could only be understood by those who actually had to deal with them.

“I was abandoned because of my blessing, then picked up because of it. I did the work I did, and that’s how I ended up here with all of you… It’s funny how things work.”

“…That’s certainly an eventful life…”

“If you ask me, ending up not killing would have seemed a lot more unnatural.”

“That debate is already over, though. Don’t do it again. It doesn’t matter how many times you’ve done it before. Nothing’s changed… Anyway, just as a hypothetical…”

“What?”

Meili cocked her head and looked up at Subaru as he pointed to the shelves. There were countless books. If they really were the traces of everyone who had lived in this world…

“If your parents’ books are somewhere in the stacks here… would you want to read them?”

“My parents? Not Mama, but my actual parents?”

Subaru nodded as Meili looked surprised.

It wasn't impossible. Meili said that her parents had abandoned her as a baby, but she had no way of knowing that. It was entirely possible there was some sort of extenuating circumstance that forced their hand, and the answer to that question might be in their books.

"I don't care at all, though?"

She responded with a puzzled look.

It wasn't acting tough or putting on a brave face. Those were her honest feelings on the matter. She didn't even feel any hatred or hostility. It was just plain and simple apathy.

"I see…"

"Don't misunderstand, mister. I don't resent being abandoned by my parents. They don't matter enough for that."

In Meili's life, the parents who abandoned her were not objects of interest. From her point of view, other than the initial act of bringing her into the world, they had never interacted.

I guess that's how it is.

Subaru exhaled.

A journey to find oneself was a clichéd way of describing it, but Subaru felt like there was meaning in discovering one's roots.

At the same time, that was just the opinion of an outsider. If Meili didn't feel that way, he had no choice but to accept it.

"In which case, the value of these bookshelves existing is feeling more and more dubious…"

"Incidentally, what were you going to do if I said I did want to read them?"

"…? Look for them, obviously. I mean, doing that right away would be impossible, but we could do some research into your past, and if we could figure out a name, make some time to ch—"

"You really are a dummy, mister."

"What'd I do to deserve that?!"

It was such a simple insult that all Subaru could do was raise his voice. Meili just shook her head and stood up. Dusting off her bottom, she glanced over toward the bookshelves.

"I mean, there's no way you could find the book you're looking for in all of these."

"If you ask me, as long as there's a chance, it's worth trying."

"Well, that's too bad. Since there isn't anyone's book I want to read…"

It was faint, but her voice trailed off ever so slightly. Subaru furrowed his brow.

"Hmm?"

"Just a thought…" Meili turned around. "…More books show up here when people die, right?"

"Yeah. At least I think so."

"How does that work, I wonder? If you died right here and now, would your book suddenly pop into existence? I am curious about that."

"I see! Unfortunately, I'm not going to test out that hypothesis for you!"

Subaru found it almost insulting that she might have thought he would just accept anything she suggested. As far as he was concerned, he wasn't going to stake his life on it.

Meili's lips curled in a pout.

"You two look like you are having fun. Did you find something?"

Hearing their exchange, Emilia, who had been looking around all the shelves, came over to check on them. There was expectation in her eyes, but unfortunately, they had nothing but conversation to share.

Subaru felt bad that they didn't have more to offer when…

"Ah, Big Sister, listen, listen. Mister was hitting on me."

"I was not! In fact, we talked about how precious you are, Emilia-tan!"

"That makes me *reeeally* happy, but you shouldn't deny it so loudly. If you act like that, you'll make Meili sad, right?"

Emilia didn't even pretend to be embarrassed as she casually brushed off Subaru's reaffirmation of love. After gently scolding Subaru, she turned to Meili and apologized.

"Sorry, Subaru has a habit of trying to show off. I'll have a proper talk with him, so just tell him he's cool and forgive him for now."

"…What do you think of mister?"

"…? Subaru is my important and special knight…"

Emilia's eyes widened, not getting the point of the question.

Seeing that, Meili smiled weakly, and she looked over at Subaru, whose shoulders had slumped.

"Looks like a rough road ahead for you, mister."

A grave, pained silence was all Subaru could muster in

response.

2

"Where is the path up to the next floor, anyway?"

"We don't have any clues for that yet…"

Emilia cocked her head while Subaru twisted his in the opposite direction.

After being completely and utterly outplayed by a little girl, Subaru was enduring the bitter taste left in his mouth as he and Emilia were forced to consider a change in plans.

The new priority was to best whatever challenge stood in their way and ascend to the second floor of the Pleiades Watchtower rather than attempting to use the countless books of the dead that filled Taygeta.

"It feels like this archive is too much for us to handle right now…"

"Mm-hmm… Even if we manage to find a name we know, the chances they know what we want to learn… It seems *really* low."

Emilia's eyes sagged regretfully, but she was right. Unfortunately, it was hard to claim that the books of the dead were well suited for finding the knowledge they needed. Searching for the memories of a dead person whose name and face they could put together would require an enormous amount of time and the sort of luck needed to win the lottery. They couldn't afford to count on having either of those. Time went without saying, but counting on luck was basically suicidal as far as Subaru was concerned.

"Most likely, the information we want should be on another floor."

"But can we even go up? I tried hopping up on one of the shelves, and it was no good."

"That was bold of you…"

When they decided to look for the stairs to go up, Emilia had immediately jumped on top of a bookshelf to check if there was a hidden staircase somewhere. Unfortunately, she failed to find a hidden passage, so her decisive leap into action had not borne fruit.

Incidentally, when she leaped up onto the shelf, her short skirt's hem had swayed rather dramatically, causing a brief scene that made Subaru quite flustered.

"Ah, it's okay. Puck taught me a lot about making sure my skirt

didn't flip up. A 'graceful comportment befitting a proper girl.' I'm always careful about that."

"I'm not sure whether I want to compliment Puck or be mad at him… Either way…"

Setting aside that shocking revelation, Emilia's failed attempt was enough to say that they couldn't forcibly break through to the next floor. Because of that, their search for a way to Electra was in dire straits. It was almost like a follow-up question to the previous examination.

Getting too elaborate would make challengers just quit, but Flugel probably had that in mind while setting it up. Talk about unpleasant.

"I'd love to see the look on his parents' faces when they realize they raised a monster… Though fat chance of that when I haven't even seen what the man himself looks like."

"…Subaru, a moment if I might?"

Julius called out to him.

He and Anastasia had challenged the room full of books from a different angle, so Subaru hoped that maybe they had discovered something, but…

"How is it? Find anything?"

"Unfortunately, I cannot claim any results worthy of the name. Despite my best efforts, I could not discern any sort of organization system that governs how the books are arranged. They do not appear to be sorted by name or chronologically."

"It was already fairly clear they're not organized by name, but no luck with time, either, huh…?"

Figuring out how the books of the dead were arranged was their one hope for deciphering how to use the Taygeta archive. If there was an easier way to search for specific books, it might have been quite useful.

The topic of how books were added had come up in that conversation with Meili, but if they weren't arranged in any discernible chronological order, then it wasn't very relevant.

"All we know so far is that we don't know anything. We were wonderin' what you two found."

"Mmmm, sorry. We didn't find anything on top of the shelves, either…"

"Ah, so that's why you climbed up before. I was wonderin' what that was about…"

Anastasia flashed a slight, wry smile.

“May I?” Julius raised a finger as he looked at Emilia. “I suspect it is the same conclusion you reached, but this Taygeta archive is too much for us. We do not have nearly enough time to study everything in such an enormous archive.”

“Mm-hmm, we were thinking the same thing. That’s why we were looking for the stairs to the next examination.”

“That is a worthwhile search. However, at the same time, I would like to find some sort of way to make use of this.”

“…Did you have something in mind then?”

“Yes, of course. As a proposal, we could raise an army.”

Touching on their extreme lack of people for the task, Julius answered with the straightest of faces.

“An army…?”

Emilia’s eyes widened in open confusion, but Subaru snapped his fingers.

“Ahhh, I hadn’t thought about it that way, but that’s totally an option now that the barrier keeping people from coming to the tower has disappeared. And assuming they can clear the demon beast–infested desert…”

“…Then they can reach the tower. Even so, it is quite the adventure. However, with the option of throwing people at the problem now available, there is more than enough value in reporting what we have discovered to the kingdom.”

“The research value is definitely huge… They might be able to fill in a lot of the moth-eaten gaps in the histories you love so much.”

“That is merely a delightful secondary benefit.”

Julius quickly fired back at Subaru’s joke, but then he shook his head.

“No, I would be lying if I said I did not have some hope of that possibility. Apologies, my suggestion had selfish motives.”

“You don’t need to get bent out of shape over it. There’s nothing wrong about selfish motivations. If that’s how you’re taking this, what about someone who moves one hundred percent on ulterior motives like me? What am I supposed to do?”

By and large, Subaru expected some sort of return on his actions, and he did not expect he could abandon selfish motives and act out of duty alone. Subaru’s guiding philosophy was always to focus on himself.

“It isn’t worth that much effort to avoid. Besides, at least as far

as I can remember, Anastasia's reason for wanting to claim the throne was purely selfish, too. Right?"

"Mm-hmm. You aren't wrong. It's to satisfy something I want personally. And as a result, the people around me also benefit. That's all it is."

Anastasia smiled, seemingly unbothered by Subaru's rude—or at least blunt—point. She touched her scarf and kneaded the white fur.

"But Julius being like that and me how I am makes for an interesting pairing. At least that's what I think, but what do you think?"

"Personally speaking, it's convenient that our rivals aren't in perfect alignment, so the longer you guys have ideological differences, the better— Oww! That hurt, Emilia-tan!"

"Don't say things like that. I don't know that much about either of you, so I don't want to step out of line. But in whatever way my opponents might be praiseworthy, I'm going to do my best in my own way, working hard with my knight and everyone else."

Grabbing Subaru's sleeve when she said "my knight," Emilia held her head high. Subaru's heart warmed as he watched her from the side, and he exhaled slowly through his nose.

"I might be a tenderfoot, but I won't lose."

"There's a word you don't hear too often anymore."

"…From time to time, you two seriously scare me. I can't tell what parts are serious and what parts aren't."

"Me aside, Emilia-tan is pretty much always completely serious and earnest. That's what makes her charming, right?"

Julius grimaced at Subaru's wink, and with that, their derailed conversation reached its final stop. It was up to Anastasia to clap her hands and get things back on track.

"All right, all right. So then, getting back to the previous topic… Given that we don't have enough people, we were talking about whether we should bring in help from outside, right?"

"Yes, my Lady, that is correct. At this point, it should be possible to dispatch a dedicated team of investigators to this tower. They might be able to find not only the path to the next floor, but also something helpful in this archive—"

"Mmm, that makes sense. It does, but I'm preeetty scared of it."

"Scared, my Lady?"

Anastasia slowly shook her head, interrupting Julius's heated

explanation. Seeing her knight furrow his brow, she raised her finger.

"It's like this. I'd definitely welcome more hands to help here. It's tough looking around this whole floor. Especially with how short I am and all, just siftin' through the shelves is a real pain." Anastasia tapped the back of her neck. "But the cornerstone of trade is putting yourself in other people's shoes. Well, it's not limited to trade, more like a rule of thumb that's useful in all sorts of situations. Anyway, try thinking things through with that in mind."

"Think about it from the other side's perspective? But who is the other side?"

"The person who made this tower, set up the examination, and placed Shaula here…that person. Think from his perspective. You can see it once you do, right?"

"What, a horrifically twisted personality?"

"Like we can't even imagine, probably."

Anastasia nodded in agreement with Subaru's answer.

Emilia and Julius had troubled expressions as they heard that answer because they were earnest and good-natured. Subaru and Anastasia were both on the more twisted side of the spectrum, which was why they were naturally in sync on this.

Anastasia's right. If a twisted jerk wanted to make it even harder to clear the tower, then…

"Shaula! There's something I want to ask you. Come here a sec."

"Master? Hold on! I'll be right there!"

Without anything else to do, Shaula had been playing with Meili near the stairs leading down, but she leaped up when Subaru called her. She literally flew through the air and slid across the floor, landing in a formal sitting position right in front of Subaru.

"What is it? What is it? Is there something you want me to do, Master?"

"I feel guilty when you look at me so excitedly… Anyway, you know where the stairs to the second floor—"

"No clue! I've never been higher than the fourth floor before!"

"In four hundred years? That's *reeeally* surprising…"

If what Shaula says is to be believed, she has spent four hundred years in the tower. If she really did just stay focused on watching the dunes outside that whole time, her level of devotion is way too admirable. Enough that it would be hard to deal with being treated as a

master by her.

"Shaula, mind if I ask something, too?"

Anastasia, who was in the process of laying out her own theory, interjected.

"You're what? The Great Pleiades Library's guardian, right?"

"Like I said."

"I see. In that case, my guess is…four. No, maybe five?"

"Hmm?"

"The secret rules you were told in order to protect this tower. There are five, right?"

"—Ugh?!"

Anastasia wore an elegant, restrained smile when she saw how Shaula was shaken.

The way her wide eyes and shoulders twitched said everything, proving that Anastasia's suspicion was correct. But Subaru and the rest didn't understand what Anastasia was driving at.

"Rules? And secret? What are you talking about?"

"Y-you've got it wrong, Master! Also, it's not like I'm hiding things—I just didn't say anything because you didn't ask. I want to make sure the record shows that!"

"Just spill it already."

Shaula frantically tried to cover her ass after her secret was revealed, but Subaru didn't give her anywhere to run. Realizing that she wouldn't be able to wiggle her way out of this, Shaula remorsefully touched the fingers of both hands together.

"Hypothetically speaking, if you all tried to secretly leave the tower behind my back, I would have to mercilessly kill all of you."

"Where'd that come from?!"

"It's got nothing to do with wanting to do it or not! It's just a hypothetical! If anything, it's something that I can't disobey."

Subaru's eyes widened at the sudden declaration of hostility, and Shaula shrank down on herself and shook her head. Sitting on the ground and grabbing her legs, she trapped her voluptuous breasts behind her knees.

"There's no way I can kill Master. I'm the one who would end up getting killed, and that's the end for me. It's a massive pain in the ass…"

"If you don't want to do it that badly, then just refuse… Don't tell me it's because of a contract?"

Subaru was getting a bad feeling as he asked that.

For anyone thinking more seriously about Shaula's identity, it was a natural thought. A guardian watching the shrine where the Witch was sealed in the Sage's stead—a being who had filled that role for several hundred years. Both in lifespan and mindset, that wasn't a human sort of feat.

"Are you a spirit like Beako?"

Beatrice had been bound to the archive of forbidden books by a nonexistent promise for four hundred years.

She might even be exactly the same as Beatrice—

"Of course not. Don't lump me in with those fluffy lightweights. Absolutely not… Also, why'd everyone's eyes get a lot scarier all of a sudden?!"

"Because about eighty percent of the people here have a connection with spirits!"

Including the one novice, three of their party were spirit mages. Another was a little girl who was a spirit, and another was a person whose body had been taken over by what was provisionally believed to be a spirit. The only people unrelated to spirits were the Oni girls waiting downstairs and Meili, who was watching in amusement as Shaula wilted under their collective gazes.

"Fine then, what exactly are you? If you aren't a spirit, you don't have to be that desperate to keep to your contract."

"What are you saying, Subaru? Whether or not someone is a spirit or a spirit mage, promises must be kept. That's super important. Repeat after me."

"No, I admit I didn't exactly put that the best way, but it was a figure of speech—"

"Promises are important. Three times."

"Promises are important. Promises are important. Promises are important."

Catching a rebuke from Emilia from an unexpected angle, Subaru earned his forgiveness by reciting the line three times.

Setting aside their silly back-and-forth, Subaru struggled to accept Shaula's stubborn stance. It didn't make sense that she was holding back purely out of a reverent sense of duty.

"Now look, Emilia-tan is mad at me. This is your fault! Damn it! Now get to talking already!"

"Wow, how didja figure that, Sherlock? But that's just like you, Master! I'll talk!"

Still on her knees, Shaula raised her hands as Subaru vented at

her.

"Unworthy though I might be, please allow this one to simply and briefly expound upon what she was told. First, any who challenge the Great Pleiades Library may never leave."

"Well, there's not much to be done after that."

"It's okay! There is a way out! Hooowever, it doesn't open until people have solved the examinations in their entirety and reached the first floor, Maia. After that, you're all good."

Shaula gave a hearty thumbs-up at that.

"Incidentally, if anyone runs afoul of this condition, I'll transform into a cold-hearted killing machine. My promise with you would be voided. I would kill whoever broke the rule."

"It takes precedence over your promise to me? I'm hurt."

"Ohh, hurting Master is a big success. I've leveled up to a new stage of evolution! The culmination of four hundred years!"

"I was being sarcastic!"

"Me too!"

After an exchange of sharp jabs, Shaula held up a second finger and wagged it rhythmically.

"Well, I'm bored of this, so I'm just gonna slam 'em out now. One, it's forbidden to leave before the examinations have been completed. Two, it is forbidden to break the rules of the examinations. Three, it is forbidden to show disrespect to the library. Four, it is forbidden to attempt to destroy the tower itself. Five… Ah. Five… Ahh, there isn't a five."

"So there are four rules… But…"

Emilia accepted Shaula's explanations and turned to Subaru, who was furrowing his brow. He shared her unease and concern.

The rules that Shaula had listed, assuming that it was even possible to make it to the end without breaking them…

"…The one about it being forbidden to break the rules of the examinations bothers me."

"That would mean there are hidden rules that we do not know about."

Julius seemed to be of the same opinion as Subaru, who put his hand to his chin in thought.

At the very least, when they were in the white space with the asterism made of monoliths during the Taygeta examination, there hadn't been any rules announced to them.

At most you could say that touching the wrong monolith was

counted as a failure, but…

"…In the trials in the tomb, when you failed, it was impossible to attempt it again until the next day. It sort of resembles the retrying of the examination just now. Maybe…"

Emilia hesitated to continue, so Subaru nodded.

"If you've thought of something, just come out and say it. We won't make fun of you, no matter what."

"Okay, I understand. You and Anastasia both said it, but the person who made this tower is *reeeally* mean…right?"

"Your choice of words is adorable, but yes. So?"

"It's important to consider things from other people's perspectives. So I tried thinking like someone who is *reeeally* mean and, based on what Shaula just said, something occurred to me…" As everyone's eyes focused on her, Emilia licked her lips. Then she put her hands together and pointed her fingers toward the ceiling. "…We don't know the rules that we have to follow… That's *reeeally* not nice, right?"

"…Meaning…"

"That means we have to advance while imagining what the rules might be and being careful not to break them. Like if it was Echidna, what would she do?"

"…So she's who you think of when you think of a nasty person, too, Emilia-tan? We really are on the same wavelength."

The supplementary rewording gave it a lot more credibility to Subaru.

The concept of a sadistic personality was foreign to Emilia, but it rang true to Subaru. Setting up rules that could not be broken and then not telling the challenger about them.

"Nasty tastes and a nasty personality… Incidentally, are you the one who judges what breaks the rules?"

"Apparently, I'll just know if any of those rules I just said are broken. So there is no hiding it. You can't, and neither can I."

The last part was softer, but there was an unyielding force behind it.

Not because of how strong Shaula was. If anything, it was the opposite.

—Because there was a greater power that could make someone as strong as Shaula say that.

"…It was already dangerous enough. Just means another layer of danger. No biggie."

“Occasionally, I’m a little jealous of how easily you can say something like that.” Julius’s expression softened, and he shrugged at Subaru’s murmur. “I suppose it is a mentality that must have been nurtured by always having to face off against opponents of much higher caliber. In which case, that is a gap in experience that will be difficult for me to fill.”

“You should be more scared of what waits below you. You’re going to hit your pinky toe on the corner of a desk before long. See how it feels then.”

“All right already. It’s nice you two can get along with your little squabble, but don’t go forgetting the main topic now.”

Interrupting the two of them, Anastasia put her hand on her hip as she looked down at Shaula.

“Is that really the end? Everything else is okay?”

“I swear it. It’s not a lie this time. Also, as long as you don’t break those rules, I stay in control of my body. Ah, wrong, I mean it’s Master’s.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Rejected! But my heart will always be at your side!”

“I don’t want that, either.”

Shaula expressed her position clearly, though with some pointless extra information, too. There were problematic additions here and there, but at a basic level, it seemed like she would keep the promise she had made Subaru downstairs that she would not cause them any harm.

Of course, that was only true as long as they did not break any of the rules.

“Still, though, not being able to leave until the examinations are done… This is getting more and more like the trials in the tomb.”

“No, in the worst case, if we just beat her when she turns against us, we can leave, right? That’s an improvement.”

“You would never do that, Master! You’re kinder and more openhearted than anyone! Uh-oh, I broke out in hives from telling that lie!”

As Emilia and Subaru sighed, Shaula was suffering some just deserts for her lie.

Still, she probably told the truth, more or less. We’ve gotten enough out of her for now.

“All right, have at her, Meili! Keep a tight grip on her reins for us.”

“Leave it to me… Though isn’t that kind of a strange way to put it?”

Meili, who had been roped into the job of dealing with Shaula by Subaru, puffed her cheeks out in a pout. But she obediently climbed onto Shaula’s back, so it was just for show.

Even so, it was a bit rich coming from Subaru, but…

“You look surprisingly comfortable settled in there. Have you taken that much of a liking to her?”

“It’s sort of like our wavelengths match? It’s kind of relaxing being next to the half naked lady.”

As she said that, Meili put all her body weight against Shaula’s head. It would hurt Subaru’s neck if she did that to him, but for someone who possessed the monstrous strength needed to carry the carriage, it was probably nothing.

And Shaula easily stood up even with Meili on top of her.

“I don’t really mind. I can take care of kiddo number two at least.”

“Number two?”

“This one’s number two, that one’s number one.”

Shaula pointed over to Beatrice to clarify.

Beatrice was wandering around the stacks by herself. She must have been incredibly focused not to have heard or reacted to Shaula’s rude nickname.

“It’s rare for Beako to let something like that slip by her.”

Subaru walked over to her as she looked deep in thought. Standing beside her where she had stopped, he looked at her face.

“Beako, we’re all talking right now, so you come, too.”

“

Subaru was a little bit hurt seeing her desperately rubbing her forehead, but he was also worried about her.

Thinking about it, they were in a tower in the middle of a desert with a mysterious past. There was a miasma that he did not really understand filling the air, too, so that might have been the cause.

“If you’re not feeling great, just hold my hand. It’ll help calm you down.”

“That’s impossible given what just happened! Give Betty some time to calm down!”

Beatrice’s face was red as she shouted. It was a shock to have her reject even holding his hand, but at least she was back to normal. It bothered him a bit, but he decided to save it for later.

“Now then, the next problem is…”

“Is whether we have no choice but to search randomly for the stairs to the second floor.”

As Subaru faced the shelves, Julius finished his thought.

His expression was a little bit pained. He had been the one who had thought to report their findings back to the kingdom and gather more people to help tackle the tower, but the rules Shaula mentioned completely closed off that route.

They had to complete the examinations in order to be allowed to leave. Because of that, they had no choice but to work with the people they had there.

“If I said it feels like looking for a single grain of sand in a desert, would that translate for you?”

“It’s an unusually poetic expression for you, but one I can wholeheartedly agree with.”

Subaru and Julius were for once on the same page as they faced the difficult task ahead of them.

For the moment, they settled on looking for the stairs up to the second floor again. But just as Subaru decided to forget about the Taygeta archive…

“Hey, I was just thinking.”

As the two steeled themselves to challenge a new stage, Emilia raised her hand a bit. When they turned around, she cocked her head and put her finger to her lips.

“If someone who wasn’t honest made a tower…”

“Your word choice is adorable again, but please explain.”

Almost like a rerun from last time, but this time, Emilia

elaborated.

"The location of the staircase…what if—?"

3

"Whoever made this tower is a real piece of work!"

Standing before a long, tall staircase that led to the second floor, Electra, Subaru's anger exploded as he shouted.

The location of the passage to the second floor that Emilia had figured out by imagining the personality of the person who had created the tower.

The hiding place was—

"I thought if it wasn't inside the area on the third floor, then it must be somewhere else…like somewhere on the fourth or fifth floors that we hadn't checked closely yet."

Emilia's expression and words were half happy at guessing correctly and half disappointed.

She had been right on the money, and the stairs to the second floor were on the fourth floor, in the room right next to the green room where Ram and Rem were waiting—meaning the way up had appeared in a room that was definitely empty before.

CHAPTER 4

STICK SWINGER

1

—The stairs to the second floor, Electra, were imposing enough to be called a grand stairway.

Compared to the different sets of stairs between the sixth, fifth, and fourth floors, the width and rise of the stairs were both scaled up. They completely filled the room, so the outrageousness of it all was self-explanatory.

"There's no way this was here before…right?"

"It is difficult to imagine we would have missed such a blatant set of stairs. However, I cannot deny that I failed to notice the room itself."

"In terms of feeling off while searchin' around, I think I know what you mean."

Anastasia and Julius nodded. Subaru was confused by how easily they seemed to accept it, but that was where Emilia raised her hand.

"While you were asleep, Subaru, we gathered on the fourth floor. Rem and Patlash were resting in the green room, and we also tried to solve the third floor's puzzle. Anyway, we all walked around to figure out where to set our stuff, but…"

"At the time, everyone sort of avoided this room. Thinking back on it now…"

"Almost like there was something that prevented you from perceiving it in order to keep you away?"

Emilia and the rest of the group, who had been first up to the fourth floor, all nodded.

It was a mental blank spot they all started to notice once the

third-floor exam had been cleared. And thinking about it like that, the existence of the grand staircase almost felt natural.

"Well, without that, anyone who happened to be in here when the stone slab puzzle on the third floor was solved might get crushed…"

"Subaru, it's a monolith. I would like to avoid confusion, so please be consistent with the terminology."

"Monolith, monolith, monolith! Happy now? Moving on."

Getting a little bit fed up, Subaru fired back perfunctorily before looking at the staircase again.

It was long and straight, long enough to skip past the third floor and go straight to the second. Considering the structure, it almost seemed like following it up would lead straight out of the tower—

"Is it just operating on the mysterious power principle to somehow work…"

"Maybe it doesn't actually connect to the second floor, but to someplace else entirely… Or would that be too mean?"

"I worry that the longer we spend in this tower, the more it's going to corrupt your simple honesty, Emilia-tan. We should clear this place as soon as possible before you become more familiar with the thought processes of cruel people."

It was a great boon having Emilia help solve the layout of the sadistically designed tower, but Subaru could not help worrying whether it would warp her personality.

"Either way, though, this is a pretty good pace. I cleared the third-floor examination on the first try, and we're about a third of the way through the tower in just three days."

"It's certainly an unreasonable pace considering there hasn't been any progress in over four hundred years."

"When you put it like that, it's kind of crazy… No, but unexpectedly, I'm a man who moves history that has remained unchanged for hundreds of years. A man who moves history definitely has a nice ring to it."

Looking back on it, I was part of the group that slayed the White Whale, crushed the Archbishop of Sloth, and slayed the Great Rabbits. I helped to clear the trials in the Witch of Greed's tomb and also beat the Archbishop of Greed and reached the Pleiades Watchtower, which has never been reached. And even cleared the first examination that no one had ever even faced, and now we're about to tackle the second examination.

“Listing the achievements while leaving out the process makes it sound kind of crazy…”

I died over and over throughout all that, so it’s not like it’s all sunshine and rainbows, but still, there have been a lot of historic moments for this world in this past year.

I’m not doing it on purpose, but you better watch out, world—was the mood of it.

“*Hmm*? What is it, Emilia-tan? Why’d you grab my hand?”

“…Nothing. It’s just, I think it would be better if you appreciated yourself a bit more.”

“That again? You and Beako are already kind enough to me. Anything more than this would be a luxury.”

And if Rem wakes up, I’m sure she would be kind, too. Firm, but kind.

And Petra and Patlash and Garfiel and Otto, too. There was no room for Subaru to go easier on himself with all of them around.

Emilia’s lips quivered as if she wanted to say something, but she just looked up at him, not finding the words.

“…Natsuki’s problem is built into the foundation. It’s not something that’ll fix itself in a day or two.”

“It’s because you’re always saying stuff like that, Anastasia—”

“All right, don’t just stand around all day. Aren’t we gonna go up and see? We might have to rack our brains like on the third floor, or maybe you’ll be able to easily solve it again.”

“If it’s as nasty as the third floor, I honestly don’t have a lot of confidence.”

It was just random chance that Subaru managed to solve the third floor’s examination.

If Flugel was a wanderer from the same world as Subaru like he suspected, then it was possible the examination for the second floor might also require modern knowledge from their world, but…

“If it’s something I don’t know about, that’s all she wrote… His name is Flugel, so if something from German history comes up, there’s not much I can do.”

Flugel *is German for* wing*, if I remember correctly. No clue if it has any connection, but if Flugel really was a German, we might be SOL.*

“…Not much point getting worried about it now. Not with the next stage literally right in front of us. Can you call yourself a man if you don’t go? Let’s make it nice and smooth.”

“Unfortunately, aside from you and me, everyone here is a

woman.”

“I’m just trying to get fired up—don’t rain on the parade! All right, let’s go, Beako!”

“Ngha!”

Before his mood could get dampened, Subaru lifted Beatrice and started running up the stairs, ready to take the whole long staircase in one go.

“Dadadadadadada!”

“Ah, wait, Subaru!”

Following in the wake of Subaru’s furious dash, Emilia and the rest of the party took to the stairs. Subaru and Beatrice ran at the head of the line, leading the others.

Beatrice dexterously adjusted herself inside Subaru’s arms, her blue eyes narrowing.

“The space here must be warped. Even going up in a straight line this long, there is no indication of leaving the tower.”

“It might just be that we couldn’t tell from the outside that the tower had this sort of shape.”

“An area where this staircase juts out? It would look strange from the outside, which would make hiding this whole stairway pointless.”

“Yeah, I just wanted to put it out there.”

Agreeing with Beatrice’s theory, Subaru looked up as he panted a little bit.

It’s strange. Even after running up this far, there’s no sign of the next floor. Even running this much, it feels like I’m going up the down escalator.

“Emilia-tan’s idea is starting to feel a lot more like a real possibility…!”

She had mentioned the potential existence of a staircase appearing that did not actually connect to the floor above. Just as that thought made Subaru shudder, the space over his head opened without warning.

“Whoa?!” “Hyaa!”

The seemingly endless grand staircase suddenly ended in a white light that swallowed up Subaru and Beatrice.

The stairs had suddenly ended, and Subaru stumbled as he came to a stop in what had at some point become a new room.

It was—

“Another white room…?”

“So it would seem.”

Stopping in their tracks, Subaru gently set Beatrice down on the floor.

A white space just like where the third floor’s examination had been held unfolded before their eyes. The floor and ceilings looked infinite, creating an incomprehensible space that disrupted all sense of depth perception.

“Wah, this room again?”

The only thing that stood out as different in the white world was the staircase they had just climbed. And Emilia and the rest who had followed Subaru began to appear from it one after the other.

Anastasia, who was the last to arrive, looked around restlessly.

“Another white room? Don’t tell me we somehow ended up back at the third floor.”

“I don’t think so. It was fifty-four steps to go up from the fourth floor to the third floor, but this was four hundred and forty-four steps. That’s almost ten times more steps.”

“Y-you counted, Emilia-tan?”

“Heh-heh, actually counting steps in a staircase has been a bit of a hobby lately… Why are you patting my head?”

“A-anyway, that’s a great observation, Emilia-tan. If this really is the second floor like we hope, then…”

“The examination should start. Most likely, that is the signal.”

Dodging Emilia’s question, Subaru looked at where Beatrice was pointing—the place right in front of where the stairway let out. There was an object there that made its presence felt.

“

was, bare of excessive ornaments, just the minimum amount of steel needed, felt beautiful to him.

“So is this supposed to be a sword of selection or something…?”

“

Expecting the voice this time, Subaru managed to avoid the embarrassment of dropping the sword, but the mysterious communication was still unpleasant.

Probably because the voice in my head sounds so much like mine.

“It almost feels like getting carsick… Did everyone else hear that…”

Is it only me, or did they hear it, too? With the monolith, it had applied to everyone, not just the person who touched the monolith, so he expected the same this time as well. But when he turned around, he noticed.

“

If he stood calm and still, he possessed a beauty that would draw all eyes, a visage worthy of a painting—but it was shattered by the savage, cruel, and violent air around him.

It was a figure too handsome for so ferocious a beast.

The most beautiful wild animal—faced with that, Subaru forgot to breathe.

"Eep."

What finally broke the spell that made time seem frozen in place was a groan. There was a light thud and then the sound of a little girl crying out.

"Ahhh."

Subaru could not move his eyes, but just barely at the edge of his peripheral vision, he noticed a black-haired woman collapsed back on the floor—Shaula had slumped down beside Meili, who had no clue what had happened.

"N-nooo…"

But Shaula was so badly shaken she looked like she might wet herself.

If it were possible, Subaru would have listened to his instinct crying out and immediately run out of the room.

The only reason he had not was that his quivering legs did not allow it.

"—Ngh…"

Gulping, he forcibly closed his eyes that had forgotten how to blink and took a second to calm himself. And then, not looking away from the man, Subaru took a single step backward. Holding the sword in his right hand and Beatrice's hand in his left, he pulled her with him.

"E-Emilia…"

"I…know…"

Making sure not to leave her behind, either, Subaru called out to Emilia, who had frozen, too. Emilia's voice was trembling as she nodded. Unable to keep his knees from wobbling, Subaru slowly moved back in time with her.

"Fool who attained the heavenly sword, gain his sanction."

They put some distance between them, but the man still did not move. He just repeated those words.

"Fool who attained the heavenly sword, gain his sanction."

Backing away while keeping every last nerve focused on the man, Subaru made it next to where Shaula had collapsed to the

ground. Her face was still twisted in fear, and Meili was holding her arm, unable to move.

"Fool who attained the heavenly sword, gain his sanction."

The couplet he was repeating was the prompt for Electra's examination.

There has to be a reason why he's repeating it. The words I heard when I pulled the sword out and him repeating them, fool, sanction…

"Fool who attained the heavenly sword; gain…his…"

"—Huh?"

Subaru's thoughts accelerated as a terrifying conclusion started to take shape. And just then, there was a change in the man's voice.

—A change forceful enough to shock Subaru and the rest.

"Fool…heavenly sword…gain… Ah, aaaaooo, oooo, aaa."

"Wh-what? What's happening?"

"Ahhh, ahh, ahhhhhh!!!"

"EEEK!" "Wah?!"

The man's speech started to break down, and then it came out in a rush.

Whimpering at that sudden outburst and unable to bear it, Shaula leaped onto Subaru. She clung to him for dear life, and he went tumbling, unable to properly catch her.

"That hurts! Shaula, what are you—?"

"Ahhhh! Master! Save me, Master! I don't wanna! Save me!"

"—Shut up! Squealing hurts my head when I'm hungover! Quit bitching already!"

"Ah…"

Before Subaru could calm her down, Shaula reached her mental limit.

She passed out and went totally still, which was a one-eighty from how much she had been struggling before. Her arms were still wrapped tight around Subaru's waist, but she was out like a light.

"Wait, seriously…"

"*Burble, burble*…"

Conveniently conveying the fact that she was unconscious, Shaula made a complete retreat from the front lines. Her reaction was completely and entirely outside Subaru's expectations. Her fighting strength at least was the real deal, so for her to be that scared…

"It seems fair to believe that you are not an average person."

"Wha?"

A single step rang out as the annoyed man growled.

It was the sole of a white shoe hitting the ground as an elegant knight stepped forward—in his hand was the sword that Subaru had dropped when he got bowled over by Shaula. It was Julius, his expression stiff.

“Who are you? Actually, where even is this? Is this supposed to be some kinda joke?”

“No, not in the least. We are also quite confused. You suddenly appeared here. I hope you understand that we cannot help but be on our guard.”

“The hell? Don’t gimme that complicated shit. And don’t talk like my follower. What are you, my apprentice? You aren’t. And if you aren’t, then don’t pull any confusing shit.”

The man responded with annoyance to Julius's polite but guarded gaze.

It felt a lot more human than before when he was just repeating the examination's couplet, but it was undeniable that they were not really managing to communicate with each other, either.

"—A babe, a babe, a sexy babe, rugrat, rugrat, apprentice, and a small fry."

"Unfortunately, I am not your apprentice."

"Keh! The way you say that makes you sound more and more like him. Quit copying him."

Hearing Julius's rebuttal, the man smiled for the first time as if in a good mood—it was like a shark's smile.

Finally, that smile at least makes him seem ever so slightly human. Or maybe it's confirmation that he's a sentient life-form we can actually communicate with?

"Hey you. Explain. What is this place. What'd you do to me? Don't give me any lip neither. Spill it."

"Suddenly appearing out of nowhere… Acting all high and mighty."

Subaru clutched his chest while forcing an answer to the haughty man standing before them. The man rumbled in annoyance.

"Ahh? The hell d'you think you are. What are you sleepin' there for? Look at you. Sleeping on a bed of tits with that sexy babe there? Trade places with me."

"Unfortunately, out of respect for her feelings, I'll have to decline…"

Working his trembling knees to the limit, Subaru somehow managed to stand back up. In the process, he did not take enough care of Shaula, and her head slipped down to the floor, but he couldn't afford to split his attention.

But…

"—Ahhh? The hell are you? Huh? You messin' with me?"

"What…? You staring at my face, huh? Well?"

"Kah!"

There was a sharp sound, like teeth being grit as the man grinned ferociously.

And then, ignoring Subaru and his confusion, he turned his one

eye to look all around the white space. And then—

"Ohh, ohh. Right."

He nodded to himself as if understanding what was going on.

"Got it, got it. Well then, shall we start?"

"Start? Wait! You've been moving things along at your own pace for too long already!"

"Who asked you? My sleep talk should have explained it more than enough already. You should try listening when people tell you things."

"Already…?"

"Fool who attained the heavenly sword, gain his sanction."

Subaru's eyes spun as he struggled to follow what was going on. In his stead, Emilia murmured the couplet that had been repeated so many times already word for word.

The girls were just starting to recover from the shock. Emilia and Beatrice and Anastasia and Meili were all coming to their senses. Everyone other than Shaula.

"Kah! That babe is different from you, small fry. If I had my real body, you'd be my partner tonight… Looking closer, you're pretty crazy, hotness! What's with that face! Talk about looks that could kill!

"Hotness…?"

"You're…the examiner here! Is that about right?"

The man had an almost lustful glint in his eyes as he looked at Emilia. Cutting in between the two of them, Subaru pointed at him. The man's sharklike grin widened when he heard the question.

"—How should I know? Not like I give a flying fuck about titles anyone else gives me. If you wanna actually talk with me, then try to make me move even one step from this spot."

He was calmly standing there while entirely defenseless.

But they couldn't just laugh it off, because they realized that the requirement he'd set was hard enough to be worthy of being called an examination.

Fool who attained the heavenly sword, gain his sanction.

If he is the 'fool who attained the heavenly sword,' then that being the way to get his sanction is a relief.

Now it's just a simple question of whether moving him is even possible.

"I am Julius Juukulius, Knight of the Royal Guard of the Kingdom of Lugunica."

Before the battle—or rather, the examination—began, Julius introduced himself as etiquette demanded.

It was both fair and the barest level of respect that should be paid an opponent preceding battle.

The man's blue eye lit up. He seemed to be enjoying himself and was exuding an abnormal aura.

"I don't have a name worth saying. I'm just the Stick Swinger."

The examination for Electra, the second floor of the Great Pleiades Library.

Time: conditionally unlimited. Attempts: conditionally unlimited. Challengers: conditionally unlimited.

—Examination start.

2

—And so the test began.

The location was a white space on the second floor of the tower.

The examiner was the red-haired man with a sharklike smile standing calmly in the back of the room.

An unbelievable amount of pressure was coming from the man who identified himself as only Stick Swinger.

There was also the way he had appeared. He had made Shaula, who was at least technically keeper of the tower, faint the moment she saw him. He was quite clearly not just an average person.

And so—

"Allow me to go all out from the start!"

Leaning forward, Julius advanced with those words.

From his hand flew the sword that had been sticking out of the floor in front of the stairs. Spinning vertically, it traced an arc toward the man and landed sticking out of the ground right at his feet, just where Julius had aimed.

The man could easily reach his hand out to take it, as that was what Julius intended.

"Throwin' me a sword? You got a death wish?"

"Unfortunately, attacking an unarmed opponent would be shameful for a knight!"

“Kah! Don’t make me laugh. I ain’t unarmed. Look closer.”

The man grinned, baring his fangs as Julius closed the distance. Then he casually lifted his leg and violently kicked the sword aside. The sword of selection went flying with a loud crash.

“—Gh! Don’t regret those words!”

After his opponent completely ignored his desire for a fair fight, Julius’s face tensed as he drew his knight’s sword.

The slender sword flashed in a straight line, becoming an iron hammer to judge the man so unchivalrous as to dishonor a serious duel.

The lightning charge…

“Spare me the cute howls, dumbass. You’ve got a pretty face. Careful you don’t get me excited about making you cry.”

“Wh—gh!”

There was a thunderclap as the thrust aimed straight at his torso stopped.

Of course, Julius had not stayed his hand. He always exerted himself. So it wasn’t him who stopped the thrust, but the shark smirking at him.

“That can’t be.”

“Better learn to believe your eyes. Start there. That’s step one.”

Stick Swinger was grinning ferociously as he scratched his chest disinterestedly with his right hand. But his left hand had stopped Julius’s sword with terrifying precision.

And…

“…Wooden sticks?”

“No, chopsticks. They’re chopsticks. Just right for a little appetizer. That’s why I always carry a set on me.”

…he was holding two slender wooden sticks covered in black lacquer.

Those are definitely chopsticks. I only found out they exist in this world, too, when we were in Pristella, but he’s the first one I’ve seen able to really use them perfectly.

—No, no matter how perfectly you use them, stopping a sword with them isn’t something a human could do.

“Don’t make me laugh. Ain’t nothing better than chopsticks. You can swing them around best with the best angle and the best speed and the best feel. There ain’t nothing I can’t cut with chopsticks.”

“Gh…”

It was an unbelievable sight, but Stick Swinger looked almost like he might yawn. Everyone was at a loss for words, but Julius couldn't let it end like that. Putting more strength into his arms, he tried to free his sword from the chopsticks' grip, but he couldn't move.

"Don't force it, don't force it… Smile. People are prettier when they smile. Not that it matters for a guy, though."

Suddenly, he loosened the grip on the sword, and for a brief moment, Julius was staggered by the strength he had put into pulling his sword. But using that one moment, his opponent's body spun, bringing his long leg right into Julius's thin waist, which sent him flying.

"Julius!"

Subaru didn't know who had shouted. Julius's body went flying like a leaf fluttering in the breeze. And what awaited his body flying through the air was…

"Kah!"

Stick Swinger leaped into the air, catching up to Julius like he'd been shot from a gun. Getting above Julius with what seemed like impossible agility, Stick Swinger swung the two chopsticks down with the force of a storm.

Sensing the danger of the oncoming attack, Julius moved to deflect it with his sword on instinct. However, the man's chopsticks evaded the sword as if laughing at the idea that they could be parried, stabbing Julius, stabbing him, stabbing him, stabbing him —

"Jiwaldo!!!"

In a split second, a hot ray was unleashed straight at the two of them hanging in midair.

It carved away at the world in a simple and frighteningly straightforward way, just like light itself. In other words, it roasted everything in its path. It was a blade of heat that burned and severed everything.

It was direct, and it might seem easy to avoid, but it raced at light speed, chasing right after its prey.

Even Stick Swinger wouldn't be able to anticipate a beam attack from someone outside the ring—

"—My sword can even cut light."

Before they even could hear what sounded like mere bravado, the chopstick attack he unleashed tore straight through the heat

ray.

Everyone's eyes widened at the unimaginable, unbelievable scene. But the man just grinned tauntingly, as if it was only natural —and he still kept pummeling Julius all the while.

"—Gh! *Jiwaldooo*!!!!"

Her bloodshot eyes were totally focused as she cast again—

Spreading her hands wide, casting the heat ray spell again was Anastasia, a deadly determination coloring her beautiful face. Her fingers were spread, and from their tips, ten separate rays fired, all right at Stick Swinger.

—And Stick Swinger picked an astonishing way to avoid getting hit.

"Kah!"

He cut the light rays closing in on him with his chopsticks again, then immediately shot through the air and descended sharply, striking Julius precisely in the solar plexus with the tip of the chopstick and pinning him to the floor while dragging his whole body across the ground.

"Ka-ka-ka-ka-ka! Better aim carefully. You couldn't stop a fly. You're not gonna get pretty boy back like that. Ka-ka-ka-ka!"

"Jiwaldo! Jiwaldo! Jiwaldooo!"

Anastasia unleashed an unending stream of rays as the man sprinted and cackled. But even if the magic was powerful, it did not mean anything if it couldn't land a hit.

The man's combat prowess and Anastasia's—or rather, Echidna's—lack of experience were plain to see. She was trying to save Julius, but despite her wishes, she was swinging and missing. She didn't even manage to land a glancing blow.

And finally, the end came—

"—Aah. Ngh…"

"Wha—?"

Stick Swinger seemed to have been enjoying himself dodging the rays, and he raised an eyebrow when the hail of follow-up attacks dried up. Anastasia had collapsed where she was standing. Seeing blood running from her nostrils, Subaru remembered. Echidna had said that using her trump card meant heavily straining Anastasia's body.

"Lady Anastasia!"

Seeing his liege collapse, the knight who had been stuck on the defensive leaped into action.

Having been dragged across the ground and hammered with a storm of chopstick strikes all over his body, Julius twisted around, undoing his royal guard mantle to deliberately cause a change in the friction. In the momentary opening that created, he escaped his opponent's merciless attacks.

From there, in a position that was almost lying on the ground, Julius spun his long legs, kicking at the back of his opponent's head. The man dodged it with nothing more than craning his neck slightly to the side, but he leaped far away from Julius's break-dance-style movement.

"That was more my style. Gimme more of that good stuff."

"I do not have time for your blather! Out of the way!"

It was an overwhelming difference in strength. Even fully knowing that, Julius still roared, charging toward the man. Despite such an intense barrage of attacks, he had not let go of his knight's sword, and it lashed out like a snake.

Even driven by righteous fury and a sense of duty, it was a beautiful and elegant attack. It was possibly the most advanced attack he had learned as a knight.

Subaru could not begin to guess how many weeks and months of hard work, sweat, and blood it had taken to learn.

And yet…

"What's this? Don't make me laugh. Get serious. Are you really trying? If this was you really trying… Talk about a serious letdown."

The thrust was stopped, the slash was deflected, the series of attacks were all swatted aside, and the finisher was finished.

All the swordsmanship that Julius had built up, all that he had trained as a knight—they were all beautifully, terrifyingly, cruelly twisted about by the man who called himself Stick Swinger and his two chopsticks.

With just those two sticks, he trampled all over half of the life Julius had lived.

"That ain't it, kid. What are you doin' fightin' by yourself? That ain't your style. That's why you're boring."

"I…!"

"If you wanna go to your woman, then have at it. Go cry in her lap, goddamned useless, ugly swordsman."

For just a second, an emotion appeared on Julius's face. Rage, hurt, despair, regret? Whatever it was, though, it wasn't something

someone looking in from the outside could know.

“

point home.

3

It was a gleaming dance of pale-blue light, small fragments of ice only barely visible to the eye—Icicle Line, a barrier of ice born of Emilia's overwhelming magic power.

"I just want to check one thing."

Deploying a limited field of mana through which she channeled her magic power, Emilia created a type of barrier before calling out to the man in the center who was scratching at the eyepatch covering his left eye.

"Ahhh? Go ahead and ask, hotness."

"My name is Emilia. Just Emilia. Didn't we just have to make you move one step? You were *reeeally* running around just now."

After introducing herself, Emilia voiced the obvious question.

Before the fight started, Stick Swinger had definitely said "try to make me move even one step from this spot." Technically, he had already lost. During the battle with Julius, he had run all around the room in every direction.

But the man just shrugged.

"Whoa there, don't go gettin' super literal on me now. I just said that in the heat of the moment. That shit happens. Sometimes you just wanna say something cool without any special meaning to it. That's all it is. You get it, don't you? Ah, I guess not, since you're a babe. And a hottie at that. You should stay with me tonight."

"Sorry, I don't really understand what you are saying. And also, I'm sure I can't win even if I fight you."

"E-Emilia…?"

Despite calling upon her vast magic power and fully ready to fight, Emilia still made that declaration without any hesitation. Hearing that, Stick Swinger's eyes widened, and Subaru struggled to just say her name as he froze on the spot.

She apologized to Subaru before continuing.

"You seem *reeeally* strong. I could tell just by watching. But we still have to get through this examination somehow. So could you please give us some way we can win?"

"

The man fell silent as Emilia made her proposition. Subaru was blown away by the terms. It was too absurd and utterly shameless.

Stick Swinger was silent, thinking for a moment about that request…

"Kah!"

He laughed, his teeth grinding together. His blue eyes opened wide as he looked at Emilia.

"—Nice. I don't hate that. You got guts sayin' something like that to me. You're the biggest idiot I've seen since Tricia. I like you."

"Does that mean we passed the examination?"

"Don't get carried away! But fine. I can't help but put on a show for a babe like you. I'll let you have it your way."

"So…"

"If you can make me move even one step, then it's your win!"

Hearing that, Emilia nodded and then turned her gaze to Subaru.

"Take care of Anastasia and Julius. Heal them."

"W-wait! You saw what just happened, right?! If you go in without a plan…"

"It's okay. He doesn't seem to be trying to kill us… And I'm going to try going all out, too."

Emilia was fired up, brushing off Subaru's attempt to stop her. She took a step forward with a determined look on her face as she pointed both of her arms at Stick Swinger.

With this much distance between them, she could unleash her magic on him without fear of retaliation.

"Hey, hotness, that ain't very ladylike."

"I learned from my knight to do everything I…can!"

Stick Swinger crossed his thick arms and grinned broadly as he stood there in an overwhelmingly disadvantageous position.

Aiming right at his smile, Emilia raised her voice on the last syllable, unleashing a stream of ice weapons in the glimmering field of crystals, accompanied by the crackling sound of the atmosphere freezing.

Swords, spears, axes, halberds, arrows, all sorts of weapons.

Icebrand Arts: Icicle Line. Using her extreme levels of magic power, she could cause untold destruction in a confined space. It was a powerful move that Subaru had thought up, and she was activating it now.

“Ey! Ya!”

It was a silly shout, but in the next moment, the scene that unfolded was anything but.

As she shouted, the sharp ice weapons she had pointed at Stick Swinger all hurtled toward him from all directions.

Faced with that, he unleashed a barrage of slashes—or rather, chopstick strikes—of overwhelming force.

“Ngh. Emilia…!”

While that was happening, Subaru had run over to Julius and Anastasia like Emilia asked.

At a glance, Anastasia’s unconsciousness was due to what Echidna had been worried about: straining her body too much. Her nosebleed had already stopped, and there were no obvious external wounds. And even for how one-sidedly Julius had been battered, there were no wounds that were life-threatening.

But the fact that he had been hit so many times was proof that if his opponent had been wielding a sword, he would have been killed more than a hundred times over.

“The two of them will be fine, I suppose. But…”

“I know.”

He cut off Beatrice, who had also come over to check on them.

They had confirmed their safety. But the beast who had done that to them was the same man Emilia was currently butting heads with…

“Kah!”

He seemed to be enjoying himself as he swung his chopsticks, catching a fragment of ice in his mouth and biting down on it. In that one swing, he tore an ice sword and ice ax that were flying at him in half.

The broken ice weapons glowed faintly for a moment before dissipating, creating a light show that only served to illuminate the beautiful savage’s rampage, making the scene look like a fever dream.

But even while doing all that…

“…He isn’t moving…”

“Once I get goin’, you can be sure I’m gonna make a show of it all the way to the end. Have some manners. If a man can’t show off while he straddles the line between life and death, then when else is he gonna do it?”

Laughing scornfully at Subaru’s words, Stick Swinger was

practically humming to himself as he intercepted all the magic. And while his upper body was moving wildly, his lower body was not. Both legs were planted, immovable as mountains.

Both Subaru and Emilia came to the conclusion that it would just be a deadlock at that rate.

"—Ugh, hyaah!!!"

And so, to break the stalemate, Emilia charged in bravely. Her slender frame danced as she swung her arms up, creating an enormous battle-ax made of ice. Emilia spun as she slammed it home at him from above.

"Ka-ka!"

He thrust his chopsticks straight forward in the battle-ax's swing. The slash fell, and he ever so slightly deflected its path with the chopsticks, making it just barely slip past him and crash into the floor.

There was a violent shock and burst of air as the ice battle-ax was shattered by a chopstick. But at the same time, Emilia let go of the ax and swung the halberd that was following close behind her, immediately chaining the next attack.

"Ey! Ya! Torya! Urya! Urya urya! Yaaa!"

A blow with the halberd, a twin blade slash, a longsword's slice, a katana's draw, a whip's crack, an ax's slam—she struck with every possible attack she could think of, but they were all easily defeated.

Naturally, it wasn't because Emilia was lacking in technique.

Subaru was the one who had thought to combine Emilia's vast magic power and her combat abilities in Icebrand Arts, and he could say without reservation that this fighting style fully utilized Emilia's abilities.

Given that it wasn't effective, Subaru would have liked to do something to support her, but…

"…Subaru."

Beatrice was holding his hand tightly, and she was surely feeling the same thing he was.

There was simply no opening to intervene. That was a testament to the saturation of magic and weapons that Emilia had created.

And at the heart of that explosion of violence stood the incomprehensible monster who called himself Stick Swinger, dealing with everything that came at him without taking a single step.

If he tried to force his way in without waiting for his chance, Subaru would just end up distracting Emilia. It stung, but he could not move until her stamina started to reach its limit.

In that deadlock, an unexpected change suddenly happened.

“Hngh! Ey! Hyah!”

Emilia was using twin blades, unleashing a double slash aimed at his neck from both left and right. He dodged by ducking his head, only to be met by the back swing, hoping to catch him on the rebound.

“Whoa!”

Bending his knees, he dodged the twin blades by leaning his back almost all the way to the ground. He was supporting his whole body just on his sturdy ankles while Emilia, who had swung and missed, could not control her momentum and stumbled.

It was the first critical opening that Emilia had shown in the battle—and the man’s body bounced upward as he swung his chopsticks up at Emilia.

In that instant, he flashed his most sharklike grin yet, leaning forward…

“You’re open.”

And using his chopsticks, he raised her breasts upward.

“Wh—?”

She had removed the cloak she wore in the desert and was back to her usual white outfit. The man grinned vulgarly as he used the chopsticks to fondle her breasts obscenely.

“Perks of fightin’ a babe. Don’t go getting mad at—”

“Hyah!”

“Bwa…?!”

Emilia clasped her hands over her head; an ice glove formed around them, which she swung down, hitting Stick Swinger on the crown of his head.

It was hard enough that the ice shattered in a single blow with a loud, hard thud. The force of the impact made him shout and cradle his head as he rolled around.

“That huuurts! Th-the hell’s wrong with you?! Usually a woman’s moves will get duller if someone does something like that! You didn’t hesitate at all?!”

“—? What, you just touched my body? You were full of openings.”

“The hell?! Who raised you?! What were your parents

thinkin'?!"

Rubbing his head, Stick Swinger was sitting cross-legged on the ground as he howled. Emilia blinked in surprise and touched where the chopsticks had caressed her.

"…Did I…say something weird?"

"Hey! Do somethin' about her! Take her outside once in a while! Lame ass! You're her chaperone, right?! Get your act together already! That hurt, damn it…!"

“Quit screwing around yourself! The hell do you think you’re doing to Emilia-tan?! Pervert! Shitstain! Archbishop!”

Subaru roared back at Stick Swinger for copping a feel. In that moment at least, he was outraged, forgetting all his fear and awe of the wild and outrageously powerful man.

“Subaru, calm down! Betty understands how you feel, but look closer!”

“Ahh?! Look at what…”

“His feet.”

Beatrice pulled his sleeve, snapping Subaru back to his senses. And doing like Beatrice said and looking at the man’s feet, his eyes widened.

“He moved. And not just one step, either.”

“Ah! He did! Hooray! I win!”

The man fell silent as Emilia put her hands together and leaped in the air.

In response to her celebration, her ice magic transformed into flowers, blooming in celebration of her victory.

She had cleared the condition he had set of making him move a step.

It was clear for anyone to see. So long as the man in question didn’t contest it.

“No matter how it happens, a win is a win… So what are you going to do?”

Unlike Emilia, Subaru didn’t have high expectations for the man’s willingness to honor what he said. It was hard to expect much of him given all that had already happened.

But despite Subaru’s concerns…

“Ah, no helpin’ it. I said what I said. Gettin’ tripped up by wantin’ to perv a bit ain’t funny, but it is what it is.”

“Y-you’ll accept it…?!”

“The hell do you think I am? If I disputed that, then what would be the point of showin’ off in the first place? Just make me look bad. There’d be no recoverin’. Not keep my word? How would I get any women?”

“At the moment, I’m not sure how you could look any worse given the way you lost…”

“Piss off, small fry! You heard me! Quit howlin’, small fry.

Anyway, hotness there won. I'll let her through. That's what I said, so them's the rules."

He violently rubbed his head, but Stick Swinger acknowledged his loss without any arguing over it.

Is he gracious or terrible?

Either way, though, Subaru did not intend to push the question.

Julius and Anastasia both had been knocked out fighting him, but most likely, it wasn't anything a trip to the green room wouldn't fix.

There really wasn't much to the examination for this floor, though…

"—So you next, small fry? Or one of the two rugrats?"

"Eh?"

Just as Subaru was thinking about being able to go up to the next floor, his eyes widened when he heard what the man said.

—The next instant, it almost smelled like the air itself was burning.

This man's presence couldn't even be compared to before. Subaru was slow to understand what was going on as his instincts cried out at the dramatic shift, as if everything up until now had only been child's play.

"There are seven people in the tower. Your girl is the first one to pass."

"

examination.

"W-wait, wait, wait! Wasn't the rule as long as one person passes, that's enough?!"

"Huh? Who said that shit, small fry? One person got through. Why should that mean everyone else does, too? It's just common sense. Common sense! Small fry to the core, huh?"

"I—I just got a lecture about common sense from the absolute last person in the world I wanted to hear it from…!"

Subaru groaned as the man rubbed his two chopsticks together while shredding Subaru's argument.

In truth, Subaru was the one who had jumped to conclusions, assuming the clear condition of the second floor's examination. On the third floor, the examination had ended when the riddle was solved, so Subaru had just assumed that if one person cleared the second floor, they would get access to another archive.

If they all had to individually clear on their own strength, then getting past this challenge was practically hopeless. Especially after seeing how difficult it had been even once Emilia had negotiated an easier passing grade.

Put bluntly, Emilia had the highest combat strength of everyone present. With Julius's contracts with his spirits broken, she was undeniably the strongest of them all.

So how are any of us going to KO this guy on our own?

"—Wait just a moment. There is a decisive mistake in what you said."

"Mistake?"

Subaru was shivering as he searched for some path to victory in such a one-sided situation. Then Beatrice spoke up as she gripped his hand tightly, like she was willing him to calm down.

"What? You're ten years too early, girlie. Or at least five. Come back when you grow up a bit more, get a little taller, and your tits and ass are more like BAM."

"…Betty never had much intention of going along with your nonsense, but what little she had is gone now, so let's get right to it."

"Straight…? What?"

"It should be obvious. Emilia said that if she makes you move one step then it is 'our' victory. So Emilia winning means we all win!"

Subaru caught his breath at that and looked over at Emilia.

He was shocked at the secret trick, that she had intended that in her bold proposition from the start. But Emilia herself put her hand to her mouth and gasped. *No, never mind.*

"Right, I did say that! I said *our*! So? In that case, wouldn't that mean we all passed the examination?"

"That is just a phrasing issue. I ain't lettin' you slide on that."

"I see… I understand. Sorry, Subaru, Beatrice. It didn't work…"

"You're giving up too easily!"

Beatrice roared as Emilia withdrew with a delicate look on her face. But thinking about it calmly, it was a pointless bit of quick wit. Though that just showed how hopeless the wall before them looked.

"Well, not like I don't get what the rugrat's saying. Apparently, at the start, it was supposed to be more like 'come at me however you want to see if you can beat me'; that was the original idea. But just doin' what someone else says is seriously boring, so I forcibly woke myself up."

"Like a forced reboot…? Or did a system failure happen?!"

"How the hell should I know? Use words I understand, kid. Quit sayin' shit like some old gray hair."

The man's mood constantly shifted between good and bad, but from what he said, Subaru gradually started to understand what he was and what had happened in the examination system.

"So the examination was just all of us working together to meet the requirement, but because you woke up, we have to pass individually?"

"Kah! But who knows which would have been easier. All of you teamin' up to kill me, or gettin' a lucky shot by letting me rub some tit… Whoa!"

"Watch your mouth, you damn molester. I'm still pissed about that."

Subaru immediately let loose with a crack of his whip at that comment. Of course, even a surprise attack didn't catch him off guard, and he easily intercepted it with his chopsticks.

"Kah! I knew you weren't the type to swing a stick, but a whip, huh? You got some good taste, kid. Save the whip-crackin' for your enemies and your girl."

"You sure look like an enemy to me! And just so you know, I'm planning on having a nice, wholesome relationship with Emilia. And I'm not planning on using a whip once we're together, either!"

“Subaru. Subaru, calm down. Don’t get baited!”

“That’s right, Subaru! There’s no need to get so mad! He only touched my chest. He didn’t do anything inappropriate.”

“That *is* inappropriate, Emilia-tan!”

“That’s the sort of thing you’re supposed to get mad at, hotness.”

Emilia tried to calm Subaru down, but Subaru and the man both interjected. Emilia’s eyes widened at their unanimous warning, and Beatrice sighed heavily.

Then…

“—Can I say something?”

A voice that had stayed silent thus far interrupted their strange conversation.

“…I don’t really want to say this, but we should probably turn back.”

Meili held up her small hand. She had Shaula’s head resting on her lap as she slowly shook her head. Her yellow eyes were clearly scared.

“I don’t know how you can just talk normally with him, mister… Mister knight and the scarf lady are both down, and the half naked lady, too.”

“Shaula’s reason is different, but…you’re right, it is strange.”

Meili’s timid opinion was a natural conclusion considering the situation.

If anything, Subaru, who was thinking about continuing to fight, was clearly anything but calm. He had been heavily influenced by Stick Swinger’s overwhelming presence. Add to that Emilia’s groping plus Julius and Anastasia getting knocked out, and it became clear why he couldn’t be objective, but…

“Hypothetically speaking, are we allowed to turn back and come in again?”

Stick Swinger’s strength was on a completely different level of destructive power.

With just two chopsticks, he had annihilated Julius, gone toe to toe with Emilia, and still clearly had plenty of energy to spare. It was no exaggeration to say he was on Reinhard’s level in terms of power. They had absolutely no chance of winning.

Having finally reached that conclusion, Subaru decided to retreat. And then…

“—I’m out.”

“Eh?”

“I’m! Out! I’m out! Done! I don’t care anymore.”

Seeing them focus completely on pulling back, the man responded like a child having a tantrum.

“Store’s closed. Beat it, all of you. I’m bored. I can’t do this.”

Sitting down on the spot with one knee up, he sent them back.

“… W-wait just a second! What the hell is that?! Do you just decide whatever you want about this examination on a whim?!”

“Who asked you? I’m the only one left to judge things here. If I say I’m not gonna do it, then I’m not gonna do it.”

It was an outrageous thing to say, and Subaru had no idea how he should respond. The man continued.

“Also, when I don’t feel like goin’ at it, I don’t play around. So you sure you wanna do this?”

A deathly chill hit Subaru’s body.

The man’s lips curled as he put away his chopsticks, abandoning every weapon. He still wore a smile, but it now had a different quality.

As ferocious as it was before, it had still had a warmth to it. Now it was the dark, bloody, murderous smile of an evil beast.

“…Ah…”

There was a soft groan.

Looking over, it wasn’t Subaru but Emilia beside him. She put her hand to her white throat, and her jewellike eyes widened in shock.

Her knees gave out, and she fell to the floor. It was only then that she realized she had forgotten to breathe…

“Haah…”

And seeing Emilia reminded Subaru to breathe, too. Putting a hand to his throat, he took a knee while desperately trying to bring air into his lungs and oxygen into his blood.

If there hadn’t been a visceral reminder, it seemed all too possible that he might’ve suffocated. The man’s looks could literally kill.

“Rack your brains and try to find a way to win. The hottie’s trick ain’t gonna work again. Not for anyone at least as hot as the sexy babe nappin’ over there. Now beat it—I’m gonna sleep.”

His voice was low and serious as he gave that final message before lowering his head. After a brief moment, he went to sleep but was somehow just as obnoxious as he was when he was awake.

In a way, he snored exactly the way Subaru expected him to—but no one in the room could muster a laugh.

"Let's hurry."

I want to get away from here as soon as possible.

Meili didn't resist her instincts. And her words were the impetus the others needed. Carrying the wounded with them, they were forced to retreat from the examination.

5

"I see, so that's why you came crawling back in such low spirits after the second examination."

"…That's harsh, Big Sis."

"Don't speak like that. It makes that passed-out girl's theory about you being her master sound all too plausible."

"That's bad. I'll be careful."

Subaru shrugged weakly at that scary warning. Ram sighed slightly at that response.

They were in a different room on the fourth floor after reuniting with Ram in the green room. In addition to Subaru and Ram, Emilia, Beatrice, and Meili were there. There was also Shaula, who was lying on the ground.

Their party withdrew from the second floor, going down the long, long stairs to bring Julius and Anastasia to the green room, entrusting them to the spirit.

And then they caught Ram up on what they had learned about the third and second floors.

"He sounds like quite the absurd examiner, but…Lady Emilia cleared the bar, didn't she? Couldn't she have taken a look at the next floor's archive by herself?"

"Ah, that's right. I might have been able to go ahead on my own… Should I check with Mr. Stick Swinger?"

"…No, don't do that. We don't want to provoke him when he's already in a bad mood. And even if he said you could go up alone, it would be…dangerous."

"I'll be *reeeally* careful, though."

"Too dangerous." "Much too dangerous." "Far too dangerous."

Subaru, Ram, and Beatrice immediately splashed cold water on Emilia's resolve. That said, they weren't holding her back out of an overprotective concern.

“With the second floor’s examination being what it is, the odds of something dangerous waiting on the next level went way up. Letting you go alone when there’s no guarantee you can come back down is…”

“Then we’ll just have to work hard until we can all beat Mr. Stick Swinger together?”

“It would certainly be nice to do that, but…”

There was an argument to be had whether it was even possible. Their strongest fighter had only just barely cleared the hurdle after lowering the bar almost all the way to the ground. And Julius was currently unconscious…

“It’ll be fine if he doesn’t beat himself up too much about it…”

“Are you worried about Julius?”

“Who knows…? Well, I guess I am a bit worried… But it’s not that simple.”

After he lost completely to Stick Swinger in a head-on match, Julius’s expression when his sword was broken stood out to Subaru. On second thought, he decided he was worried.

Julius’s swordsmanship had failed him; he had been toyed with like a child by his opponent and even had his sword broken…

“There’s a spare sword in the carriage, but it’s not that sort of a problem, either.”

“A sword can be reforged. Betty doesn’t understand what there is to be so hung up on.”

“You take good care of the stuff I made for you, like that handkerchief or mittens or apron, don’t you, Beako? It’s sort of like if those were destroyed, but on an even bigger scale.”

“…Sorry for saying something so foolish.”

Subaru exhaled and patted Beatrice on the head as she retracted her strong statement.

He could not imagine how Julius would react when he finally woke up. Would he be depressed, or would he be able to at least act tough, like his usual self? Either way, Subaru did not know what to say, and it was weighing on him.

And in terms of concerns, Julius wasn’t the only one.

“What was with Anastasia…with Echidna’s desperation…”

A big suspicion that stuck in Subaru’s head was Anastasia/Foxidna’s decision to interfere and directly support Julius in his duel.

In the moment, Subaru and everyone else were all looking for

the timing to do something to support him. But for Echidna to be the first to act was something he hadn't imagined.

All through the trip, and even after reaching the tower, Echidna had never forgotten about acting like Anastasia, and she had kept her promise of taking care of Anastasia's body, too, as far as Subaru could tell.

So why did she do that?

"

with her own confirmation.

"Subaru isn't lying. I haven't ever seen Reinhard fight seriously, but…mmm, I think he was probably about that strong."

"Then, trusting your and Barusu's description, if he is an enemy of a similar quality to Sir Reinhard…if we are talking about someone who can stand on the level of the strongest person in the world, then at present, each country has one."

"Reinhard is the strongest in the kingdom, and each of the other three countries have their own strongest, too?"

"The Volakian Empire's leading general is Cecils Segmund, the Blue Lightning; the Holy Kingdom Gusteko's is the Mad Prince; and the Kararagi Federation's is Admirer Halibel. But none of them fit the physical description."

"No one with long red hair?"

"The Mad Prince's description isn't known, so I cannot say there."

"Prince… A prince, huh…? He didn't really feel like a prince, did he?"

The mad part of the title made it hard to say for sure, but while he had certainly been handsome, he did not seem like a royal.

His was more a savage sort of beauty, the kind that was allowed because it existed in the wild.

"In which case, could he be some sort of martial artist unknown to the world…?"

"He wore Kararagi clothes, and he was proficient with chopsticks, I suppose."

"That's too different from how they are intended to be used, so I'm not sure you could really call it proficiency…"

And Subaru couldn't really imagine him being some great martial artist who was unknown to the rest of the world. With how strong he was and how grandiose he behaved, it was hard to imagine him staying anonymous.

And he's part of this weird tower, so there is the question of whether he is some random strong person or if there's some deeper connection…

"Hey, mister, got a second?"

"Hmm?"

"The half naked lady seems to be waking up."

Meili, who was devotedly lending Shaula her lap to rest on in the corner of the room, raised her hand. Like she said, Shaula was still resting her head, but her body was stirring almost seductively

as she started groaning.

And as everyone turned their gaze to her, her eyelids slowly opened…

“Master… Don’t leave me alone… I don’t want to be by myself anymore…”

“Don’t say something that pulls on the heartstrings right when you’re still half asleep! Are you actually awake?!”

“Tch. I was hoping you’d be moved if I said something touching, but I guess it was no good. B-but I love that part of you, too.”

“Making me worry for nothing…”

Swinging her long legs up and then back down, Shaula nimbly stood up. Her long hair swayed as she looked around the room, then cocked her head.

“Huh? Why are we here? Didn’t we get past the examination, thanks to Master’s dramatic insight, and head up to the next floor…?”

“Yeah, that wasn’t a dream. That happened.”

“Then Master held me and said ‘I’ll never let you go’…”

“That part was a dream! You fainted right at the start of the second examination!”

Shouting at Shaula, Subaru tried to get her to remember what happened right before she collapsed. But Shaula snorted as if laughing at the idea.

“Passed out? There’s no way I would do something pathetic like that. I didn’t pass out after meeting you again after hundreds of years, did I? Don’t make me laugh!”

“I can understand being dubious about it, but you really did pass out. Subaru and Meili were both *reeeally* worried. Please believe us.”

“Eh! Master was worried about me?! Geh-heh-heh, I believe you.”

“So easy…”

“The way I was totally uninvolved just now sort of feels rude…”

Subaru and Meili each were of two minds about how easily Shaula changed her mind. Shaula cocked her head.

“Huh? But what could’ve happened that made me pass out? It’s weird for me to get knocked out. If that happened, wouldn’t everyone other than Master get slaughtered…?”

“I can understand your wild expectations of Barusu…or rather,

your master, but it is the truth. Please carefully think back… The long, long stairway is right there.”

“Long, long stairway…”

Ram’s voice was almost hypnotic, as if trying to get Shaula’s mind to travel back to what happened in her memories.

“There was a white room at the end of it, and a steel sword sticking out of the floor. And when it was taken, a strange voice echoed in everyone’s mind…”

“Mm-hmm, mm-hmm…”

Shaula and Emilia were both getting drawn into Ram’s evocative, sensuous words. Shaula aside, Emilia should already know what happened, but Subaru did not say anything for fear of breaking the moment.

“Just then, a figure appeared deeper into the room. A man in foreign clothes, with long red hair and a blue eye…”

“Hiyaaaaaa!”

Reaching the critical moment, Shaula screamed and leaped backward. She turned to cling onto Subaru, but predicting it would come, Subaru lowered his center of gravity and used his whole body to catch her. This time, he did not get bowled over.

Instead, he was smothered by Shaula’s soft skin.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow! D-do you remember?! You do, right?!”

“Wh-wh-why—why is he here?! You all said he was dead! He’s alive! He really won’t die even if you kill him!”

“Hah?! What are you…?”

Subaru’s eyes were watering in pain as he tried to figure out what Shaula was saying, but then it dawned on him.

He understood what she was saying.

There was only one person who fit that description that they had talked about since coming to the tower.

That was—

“Stick Swinger! Stick Swinger Reid! That demon! Monster! He’s come back to life to grope me again!!!”

6

Reid Astrea.

That was the name of a swordsman spoken of in legends.

A great swordsman who was said to have cut down demon

beasts, master swordsmen, dragons, and finally even a witch.

The first person to be granted the title of Sword Saint, and one of the three heroes who saved the world.

The origin point of the glorious Sword Saint lineage that was the Astrea family, including Reinhard van Astrea, and even now the greatest ideal of all who live by the sword…

It was hard to believe. That was the name of someone who should have died four hundred years ago.

Were it not for them being in a tower built hundreds of years ago with some connection to the Witch, it was something that could easily have been laughed off.

But there was a witness there from four hundred years ago.

This was a tower built by the Sage, who lived four hundred years ago.

And considering the sadism of its design, placing the ultimate guardian—the original Sword Saint—and then demanding any challengers surpass him, it felt like exactly the sort of thing that the Sage would do…

Having gathered that much, they quickly returned to the green room.

Knowing the opponent they were facing was Reid Astrea, they had to come up with some sort of plan. Fortunately, they knew exactly who to ask if they wanted to know everything there was to know about a certain Sword Saint's legends.

And even more fortunately, there was also someone who was knowledgeable about the great people of the past.

Of course, it was easy to imagine him still being troubled by his loss. But if he knew who his opponent was, that should help with the shame. It was just a bad opponent.

After all, his opponent was *the* Sword Saint—the ancestor who built the glorious and famous lineage that Reinhard had been born into.

That should be enough to erase that loss…

Thinking of all those consolations, when Subaru entered the green room, instead…

"—That idiot…"

In the center of the room, there were beds created by the spirit for the wounded. Four of them. Rem was on one, Anastasia on another, Patlash on the one furthest back.

But the one between Anastasia and Patlash was empty. There

was just a single broken knight's sword placed atop it.

7

—The man opened his eyes slowly when he heard the footsteps on the stairs and felt an overwhelming presence prickle his skin.

There was no anger at having his sleep disturbed. His life had always been lived on the battlefield.

Because he had always lived on the line between life and death, no matter what might happen, he could always be calm. Whether he would be in the mood to play along was another story, though.

"

be fit to play with me.”

CHAPTER 5

JULIUS JUUKULIUS

1

—Most likely, no one would believe it.

“My name is Subaru Natsuki! Servant of Roswaal Manor and the first knight of the royal candidate, Lady Emilia!”

How in an instant, that arrogant declaration made him the enemy of every single person in the great hall of the castle.

How even the speaker could not quite hide how spur-of-the-moment and unfounded his words were.

And how this moment left a deep, deep impression on one man.

2

It almost brings a tear to the eye how well this sword fits my hand. It is enough to make it feel as if I have been chosen by the sword.

Not that there is any reason for me to feel so arrogant right now.

“Shing!”

It feels ever so slightly thicker than my sword, and the tip is heavier. But if I attack with that in mind, I can compensate to some extent.

It’s not always possible to fight with a familiar weapon in hand. I am confident in the training I have put in considering all sorts of situations to be able to fight to the greatest extent possible, even without being able to choose my weapon.

“You’re boring.”

The man leaped backward with a yawn, easily avoiding the

confident, sharp thrust.

There was more distance between them now, but he followed with a lunge and confident footwork.

In combat, commenting on swordsmanship as a whole, what was important was not just control of the sword, but also balance and footwork, as well as the ability to know the perfect moment to close in with the greatest speed and form.

Therefore, when I began training in the sword, the very first thing ingrained in me was footwork.

I am confident I was blessed with a good master. There are many ways in which my master's swordsmanship pales in comparison to mine as it is now, but that is merely the result of the difference in our ages.

He was more skilled at nurturing the talents of others than at increasing his own. He was the sort of person who loved to talk about the history of the techniques, their development and inheritance, as much as he liked to practice them.

And naturally, I also enjoyed listening to him and thought it an honor to be able to put them into practice.

"

impact to avoid taking the brunt of the blow.

However, he could not stop the penetrating force of the kick. His world spun, and the shock hit his brain with both pain and nausea as he slammed his leg down onto the onrushing floor, raising his head to not lose sight of the enemy.

Straining his lungs painfully, he exhaled every last bit of breath still inside him. Completely emptying himself, he forced his burning lungs to remember what calm breathing was like.

“

“Bah.”

The pinnacle of knightly swordsmanship was easily deflected by a simple stick swung as a mere amusement.

A knee swung upward, hitting Julius in the solar plexus, drawing a groan and vomit. As his body was on the verge of collapsing, a series of attacks slammed into him from the front, preventing him from falling.

“Ho?”

The shock of the attacks almost sent him falling backward, but he immediately reached out with his hand to support himself. And then, taking advantage of the backward momentum, he turned it into a spinning kick, which the man avoided with a bit of a surprised sound.

Using that, Julius took some distance. He wiped the blood from his nose with his white sleeve. His uniform was dirtied by an unpleasantly vibrant red color.

It doesn’t matter. Exhaling sharply, he poured all his spirit into the sword in his right hand.

This must hit. I must be strong.

“Talk about lame. How long have you held a sword? It’s only been three months since I first picked up a sword. I can cut light, but what can you cut?”

“Right here and now, you…”

“Good joke. You think you can manage that? Not a chance. You won’t swing your sword enough to reach me. You haven’t swung it enough. You can’t swing enough. You aren’t swinging enough. You haven’t done everything you can do yet, so don’t go spoutin’ off about what you want to do.”

Julius’s only reply was to unleash a strong, powerful attack.

And as if in response, he was hit with a dozen more attacks.

“It’s not enough. You aren’t enough. You shouldn’t have come. You’re out of your league. This isn’t your stage. You weren’t invited.”

I have to be strong. I have to prove myself with my sword.

I’ve lost my name, my house, my family, my lady, my comrades in arms, my friends, the spirits bound to my soul.

This is all I have left. I am all that remains. What I have amassed here is all that remains.

This is the only proof that I exist…

“Don’t make me sick. Don’t put that pretty mask on. Are you

content just copyin' someone else? Your sword's as boring as you."

There was a time I set my sights on the pinnacle of the sword.

That was back when I thought I might be able to chase after it.

But I quickly gave up on it as a goal that was impossibly high.

When I realized with my own eyes the great duty that red-haired boy shouldered.

"No one's lookin' at you. No one expects anything of you. Don't half-ass this thinkin' I'm just playin' around. It's no fun kickin' you around."

I admired it. Overflowing, brilliant stories.

I thought I wasn't adequate to stand among them.

So I grew desperate, struggled, that I might someday reach the dream I gave up on.

"

should have been able to. But his body didn't move.

"Hrrgh…"

His entire body cried out. His head in particular had been badly hurt. His consciousness wavered, and he could not focus. If he did not hold on, it felt like the inside of his head would pour out.

Sword. Where is…the sword? As if confirming, he slowly tightened the grip of his right hand. He was met by the familiar touch of a sword's hilt. He felt a slight relief.

I can't let go. Not of this. If I lose even this, what will I have lost?

Or am I holding something else that is merely shaped like a sword?

"

sword clattering across the floor.

Even the sword has finally slipped from my hands.

I've lost my name, my pride, and even my sword, so who is even standing here?

"You don't have the right to reach the heavenly sword. You aren't even fit to be my apprentice."

With that cold announcement, the Sword Saint held the chopsticks in an overhand grip, and lowered his waist.

It was the first time the Sword Saint assumed a proper stance.

The next moment, the chopstick howled—in what was unmistakably a sword slash—sending Julius flying.

It was an attack different from every other violent kick or punch.

It wasn't savage violence. It was the pinnacle of the sword and the embodiment of true strength.

Swallowed up by light, Julius's consciousness was blown away.

Is this death? Something that surpasses death? I don't know.

But in the moment he was blown away, there was a faint voice.

"Julius!!!"

It was ragged, almost tragic.

As if in desperation, it had raced up the long stairs, only to see the final decisive moment.

Hearing that brought a strange smile.

The Finest of Knights. Member of the royal guard of the Kingdom of Lugunica. Eldest son and future head of the Juukulius house. Knight to the royal selection candidate Anastasia Hoshin.

Julius Juukulius.

"Hah."

Do I really have the right to that name now?

With that final question, Julius's consciousness was swallowed by the light and faded completely.

3

—Subaru sprinted up the long, long stairway, but by the time he reached the top, it was already too late.

"Julius!!!"

A hoarse shout came out despite the heavy burden he had subjected his lungs to.

But his voice, his words, did not have the strength to change the situation.

—A white light blotted out the already white space.

Subaru did not know what the principle behind it was. Was it because it was a slash that he claimed could cut even light, or was it the feat of a swordsman who completely broke the human mold? Whatever the reason, the slash unleashed a shockwave that swept away everything.

The person who was in the path of the slash was swallowed up by light and helplessly blown away.

And quite literally in the blink of an eye, the light disappeared, leaving only the tall, red-haired man and the purple-haired swordsman who had crumpled to the ground like a corpse.

“Yo, if it ain’t the small fry.”

As Subaru was left speechless at the scene, the red-haired man lightheartedly called out to him. His face looked as if he had forgotten what had just happened, and he was grinning like a shark, his breathing totally normal.

And then he pointed at the collapsed swordsman—at Julius.

“You were late. I already finished up with him, and he’s gettin’ in my way, so hurry up and take him back.”

“…Reid Astrea…”

“What? Don’t go investigatin’ people’s names, bastard. It’s cooler not to introduce yourself, so don’t get in the way of me actin’ cool.”

Stick Swinger—or rather, Reid—was annoyed at being called by name.

Subaru had his own complaints about that irrelevant comment, but he didn’t act on it thoughtlessly. Slowly, without taking his eyes off Reid, he moved toward Julius.

“I’m not gonna eat you. You don’t have to stare.”

“Sorry, but in my homeland, it’s common sense not to look away when you’re face-to-face with a bear.”

Still on guard and watching Reid, Subaru crouched down and checked that Julius was still breathing. He was unconscious, but putting his hand just in front of Julius’s mouth, Subaru could feel his breath.

“You’re pretty generous for someone who said they wouldn’t show any mercy next time.”

“That’s not it at all. Don’t you think it’s lamer getting beat to

shit by chopsticks and having to run away rather than getting killed by chopsticks? I do. I'd rather die than have to show my face again after something that pathetic. So that's why I beat him down with chopsticks and sent his ass packing."

"I retract my previous statement. Asshole."

"Kah! A small fry grumblin' doesn't mean nothing. 'Sides, you aren't plannin' to try me today. If you wanna rumble, I'll kick your ass, though. Just like him."

Scratching his stomach with his right hand, he pointed at Subaru and Julius with the chopsticks in his left hand.

"Piece of shit…!"

"Yeah, yeah, that's it. Shut up and carry him, or gimme a bit of that loser bitching if you want. If that makes you feel better. It's easier and smarter. Borin', though."

Sitting himself down, Reid narrowed his blue eyes cruelly. Listening to his victorious taunts, Subaru somehow managed to lift Julius.

"Bring the babe next time. Or that hottie'll do, too."

To the very end, Reid waved his hand, refusing to call any of them by name.

But Subaru had no response for Reid's joking attitude. He couldn't do anything other than run away.

4

"…Hah, hah…"

He took it one step at a time, watching his footing.

Carrying Julius on his back, Subaru climbed down the long, long stairway, his lungs burning the whole way.

"Gotta…get back quick… Emilia and Beako…must be worried."

When they returned to the green room to find Julius missing, they split up to search all around the tower. Heading to the third floor, running around all the rooms on the fourth floor, While Shaula was tasked with heading down to where Joseph and the carriage were, the rest of them divided up the third floor and the various rooms on the fourth.

They were all worried about Julius. Were all concerned about what he was feeling after having lost to Reid, after leaving his broken sword behind.

There's no room left to doubt that they're the kind of people whose

hearts ached with concern.

But Subaru was different. Subaru alone immediately understood. Where Julius went after leaving his sword like that, what he had gone to do.

It was something that only Subaru…

"…Quite…the bumpy ride…"

"Ngh! You're awake?!"

Hearing a voice from behind, Subaru stopped. Julius shifted on his back.

"Ah… Where…is…?"

"On the stairs. It might be more helpful to say we're on a long set of stairs. And even more specifically, on the stairs between the fourth and second floors, retreating back to base with our tails between our legs."

"Rather roundabout… You're…carrying me?"

"That's right. And to let you know, this makes it an even two times in the span of a few hours. Can you imagine how it feels? I was just thinking I didn't want to have to do this again, and here I am half an hour later."

"That explains…why it's so uncomfortable…"

"Do you want me to drop you?"

He could feel a faint exhalation, which he assumed was Julius laughing. That made Subaru relax just a little bit.

Honestly, Subaru had not been able to guess what Julius's first words would be. It wouldn't be hyperbole to say he had been scared of the possibilities. It was a relief that they were not despair or despondence.

"Do you remember what happened?"

"…A pathetic…story. I was easily defeated by the enemy, and on top of being pitied, I have troubled both Lady Anastasia and you."

"…I'm not enough of a devil to blame you for getting your ass kicked fighting him."

Subaru sighed at that very Julius-esque response and started down the stairs again.

Having woken back up, Julius was a lot easier to carry than before. The concern that had been weighing him down had cleared up. *I can make the rest of the way on momentum now.*

"…Is Lady Anastasia safe? I saw that she had collapsed and that she was being healed in the spirit's room, but…"

“The current prognosis is that her life isn’t in danger. You were a lot closer to dying. Against that… Oh yeah, you’ll be shocked to know who that one-eyed asshole is.”

“…Reid Astrea.”

Subaru caught his breath and stopped moving for a moment when he heard that confident response. But he quickly started moving again to hide his surprise.

“Good… Good job figuring it out. The rest of us figured it out thanks to Shaula. She apparently met him four hundred years ago, so it makes sense she’d know him, but…apparently, she really did have issues with him. That’s why she fainted when she saw him.”

“There were several clues. Flaming red hair…and blue eye. Such incomparable swordsmanship… Can it even be called swordsmanship? I could not even make him wield a sword. I suppose I should say he is truly a formidable warrior. Also, I have seen the term Stick Swinger used to refer to him in books.”

“Was he called Stick Swinger in the past because he fought using chopsticks or something?”

“More precisely, it was in the sense that he wasn’t particular about his weapons. It occurred to me when he called himself Stick Swinger, but…I was unsure. Apologies…for failing to tell you.”

There was an apologetic nuance to Julius’s tone that left Subaru cold.

He was saying there were clues to notice, but in Subaru’s mind, that was too harsh a judgment. Reid Astrea, the man who was the first Sword Saint, was someone who should have died four hundred years ago. Just because a couple of distinctive features matched didn’t mean that they should’ve immediately assumed they would run into someone famous whose name had been carried on in old myths and legends.

If it was that easy to guess, then by all rights, Subaru should’ve been able to figure it out first.

Emilia and I both commented on how the examinations in this tower were similar to the trials in Echidna’s tomb. So if anything, I should have brought up the possibility.

As a result of my laziness, we got sent packing.

“Hah. Regardless of the process, to encounter a legendary swordsman reborn from the past… Ordinarily, I would be quite pleased by such a miraculous meeting, but…”

“I can guess what you’re thinking. A legendary hero turning out

to be that guy in reality is definitely a letdown. Between that and Shaula, who was supposed to be some Sage, this tower has had more than its share of disappointments."

"…You can guess…eh?"

There was a dry, self-deprecating timbre to Julius's response.

Hearing it from so close to his ears, Subaru gritted his teeth. It had been a thoughtless response.

But he continued without touching on that comment.

"Still, though, the story was that the first Sword Saint is the guy printed on gold coins, but they look pretty different from the real person, too. Shaula being the wrong gender can be chalked up to her and the Sage being different people, but there's a pretty big gap with Reid, as well. The guy on the gold coin looks a lot older…"

"Historically, Reid's achievements that earned him a place among the three heroes occurred when he was older. So the depiction on the gold coin is likely accurate. The version of him upstairs is simply younger than that point in history."

"Oh yeah, it seemed like he didn't recognize Shaula after all…"

He had just intended to change the topic, but in an unexpected turn, it had cleared up one question.

Shaula and Reid supposedly knew each other, but the difference in reaction was pretty extreme. Julius's explanation would make sense. It could also just be their personalities, too, to some extent.

"If that's true, then he fought the Witch past his prime? And we have to somehow beat him when he's at his best."

"Our odds do not look good. Indeed, it may even be impossible."

"It will definitely be a pain. But if we build up enough countermeasures, there has to be a way out. For now…"

While searching for a clue as to how to deal with Reid, Subaru hesitated at how to continue. His heart stopped him out of concern for whether this was the time or place to tell Julius.

But he was a step too late.

"For now…what?"

"No, it's just…"

"Subaru."

If he tried to say he had seen a way to get through Reid after watching, Julius would just see through it.

So Subaru resigned himself to it when Julius said his name.

"…After you and Anastasia passed out, Emilia passed the

examination.”

“

result."

"Y-yeah. Right… As long as you understand that."

To his surprise, Julius had taken Emilia's success better than he had expected, leaving him feeling a bit let down after having been so concerned about how to explain it. *—No, it's better this way.*

He just found out that someone else had cleared the hurdle that had tripped him up.

I didn't need to worry about that hurting Julius's feelings. I guess I was just expecting his immature side to be bigger than it was. Or maybe the knight Julius Juukulius can't really be measured on the same scale as me.

Julius let out a long breath. And then he continued in an untroubled tone.

"Well then, do you think you can let me down now? If I let you keep carrying me, I might get motion sickness. Unlike a land dragon, you don't seem to have a wind-repelling blessing."

"Just deal with the swaying and wind and be grateful for the ride. I won't deny it's tiring, but I'm not heartless enough to make an injured person walk it off. Emilia-tan wouldn't let me hear the end of it."

Shaking his head, Subaru swayed his body, readjusting to support Julius.

Julius had been beaten up badly by Sword Saint Reid twice in one day. He had challenged Reid again despite not fully healing after the first loss, so his body should have been near its physical limits. Even if Reid's attacks had been intended just to break Julius's spirit and not his body.

So Subaru steeled himself to finish carrying Julius the last half of the stairs, around two hundred more steps. But…

"—No, I can't cause you that much trouble. It would be one thing if I was still unconscious, but fortunately, I've woken up. I can at least descend the stairs myself."

"Don't be stubborn. Besides, not much point acting tough now. If your embarrassed to be seen being carried, then it's too late. Everyone with us already saw… Shaula and Anastasia who were out, too, are the only ones who haven't seen it."

"Then that's enough reason. I can't allow the two of them… particularly not Lady Anastasia…to see me like this. Please let me down."

"I can tell you're pushing yourself. Besides—"

“I said please let me down!”

The outburst came without warning.

“Whoa?!”

Right after that, Subaru’s shoulder slammed into the wall.

It was because Julius had forcibly twisted himself. It was lucky Subaru had turned himself toward the wall, but if he had not been fast enough, he might have gone tumbling down the stairs.

But because he had to focus on protecting himself—

“—Ngh.”

“You…dumbass! What the hell are you thinking?!”

Leaning against the wall, Subaru turned back and saw Julius lying on the stairs a little bit lower down. He had slipped from Subaru’s back and slid down several stairs.

“I told you so! Oy! Just stay there, stupid. I’ll—”

“You don’t have to come!”

“

me. Just let them know that you found me so that they are not worried."

Slowly, slowly. One step at a time.

"…I admit I am reluctant to make this explanation myself, but it is unavoidable. If you could at least prepare the rough path ahead a little bit, I'd be greatly indebted to you. That said, I understand if my compounding debt means little to you at this point."

Julius continued speaking as he slowly proceeded to descend the steps by himself, not looking back at Subaru.

Even at his snail's pace, he was opening a clear gap with Subaru, who had stopped moving. It was a distance Subaru could easily cover if he was of a mind to. In order to answer Julius's request, he would have to catch up and pass him. So Subaru's legs started moving.

"I just have to talk to them a bit first is all."

"…Yes, that's right. If Lady Anastasia has awakened… No, that's enough already. Anyway, that is my request."

Subaru started moving, and it would be easy to pass Julius. Julius breathed what almost seemed a sigh of relief as Subaru's shoe rang out on the stairs. As if urging Subaru to go on ahead.

…No, not urging, pleading…

Subaru believed that he understood at least to some degree what Julius was thinking.

The reason he understood was the same reason he had immediately known that Julius had gone to challenge Reid again even though Emilia and the others hadn't…

Because it resembled something Subaru had felt before himself.

And so, in that moment…

"…Argh! Damn it! Damn it, damn it, damn it! Dumbass! You and me both!"

Cursing in irritation, Subaru dashed down the stairs toward Julius. Not to pass him. Grabbing Julius's left arm as he clung to the wall and stumbled awkwardly, Subaru forcefully wedged himself under his shoulder.

"Wha…? Subaru, what are you…?"

"Shut up! What are you talking about, you can stand on your own?! I can see how hunched over you are! There's no way I can just rush off and leave someone like that behind! Forget Emilia scolding me, I wouldn't forgive myself if I did that!"

"But I—"

“I wouldn’t want to lend a hand if I didn’t have to, either. Both my hands are pretty full of things as it is. If it really bothers you, then don’t look so pathetic anymore!”

Subaru’s spittle-flecked shout silenced Julius.

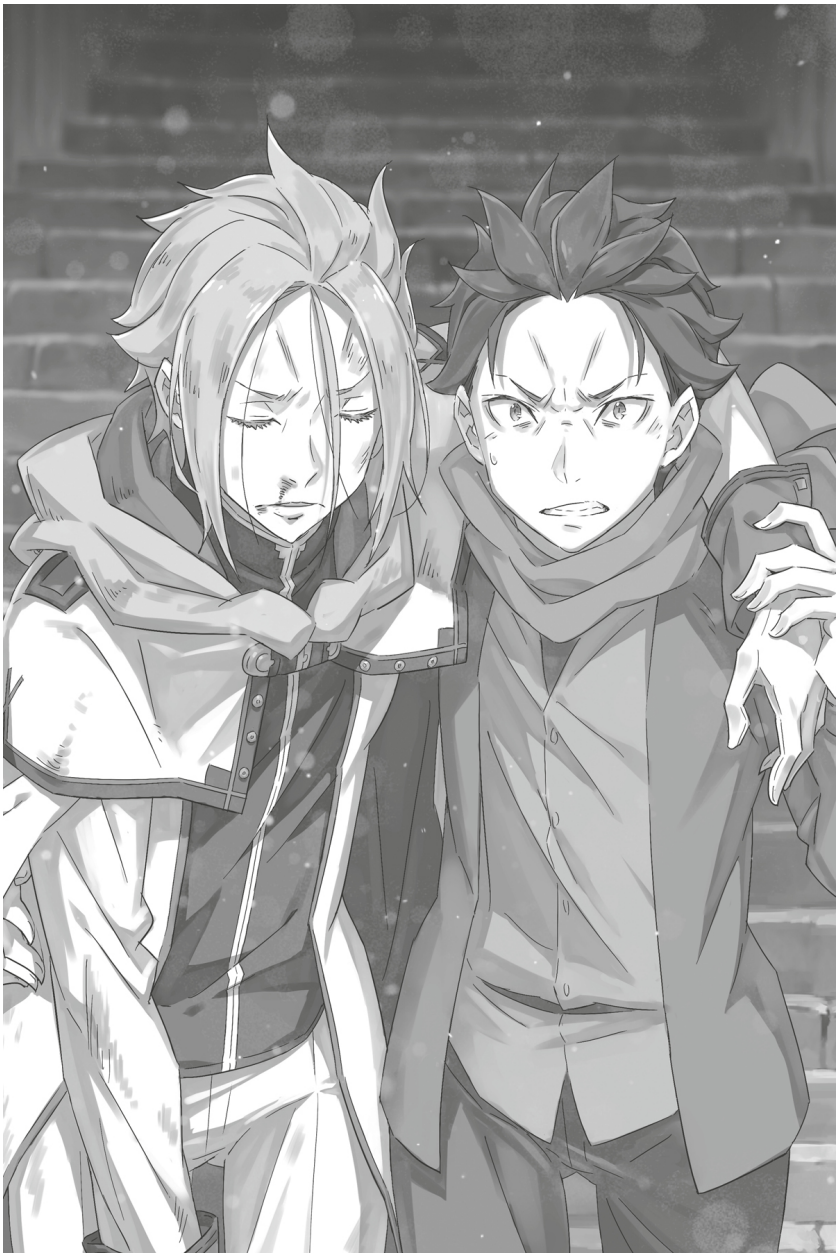
Losing the strength that he had used to shake Subaru off, Julius hesitated to resist, and seeing that, Subaru started walking while forcibly lending him a shoulder to lean on.

“I won’t say I know everything in your heart.”

“

The two of them slowly descended to the fourth floor together like that.

—It would be another dozen minutes before Emilia was relieved at finding them.



CHAPTER 6

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LIVING TOGETHER IN A TOWER

1

"Stay here and rest until your wounds are properly healed, Julius! No buts!"

Emilia shouted adamantly as she hurried the battered and bruised knight into the green room.

Following the initial relief at seeing Subaru and Julius after they finished the climb down to the fourth floor, that was Emilia's immediate reaction.

Being able to shift gears quickly is a virtue, and I appreciate the way she did it without allowing any back talk. If she doesn't ask why, we don't have to try to explain it, either. She must've had lots of things she wanted to ask Julius, too…

"I'm sure you already said what needed to be said, so for now, he just needs to rest, and everything else can wait. Right?"

Subaru shrugged as Julius sat down on the bed of plants.

"See?"

Emilia, with her hands on her hips and an imperious look on her face, was still cute.

"Of course. I have already caused you and Subaru far too much trouble. I will not behave so shamelessly as to go against request. I shall obey."

"So many words when a simple 'I got it' would—"

"Right! Then that's settled. You're the one who is hurt and needs to rest and recover! Don't worry about troubling us. That's what it means to be comrades."

"

loudly to call us."

Brushing aside Julius's roundabout apology, Emilia turned to Patlash, who was also in the green room, recovering from her wounds.

There was a limit on people who could be in the green room, so with more people wounded, Subaru and Emilia couldn't stay there. Because of that, it was best if someone in the room being treated could keep an eye on things, and in this case, they left it to Patlash.

"I am ashamed that you would feel the need to go so far, Lady Emilia. I shall simply hang my head in shame here as I was told."

"Once you lose trust, it's hard to get it back. On that point, there's no one who can beat Patlash, who is always at the top of the class when it comes to trust. If he tries anything, bite him without holding back."

Patlash whinnied, gladly accepting the request. The most understanding woman in Emilia's camp looked to be feeling responsible for letting Julius go alone before.

"See? Patlash is saying 'I won't let this blockhead escape again.'"

"It's strange. For some reason, it really does look like she is saying that."

"According to our bilingual wartime advisor, that was at least the gist of it. She's a proper lady, though, so it probably had a more ladylike ring to it."

With how deep our bond has become, I'm getting better and understanding her even without Otto lately. But if I said that, she would swat me with her tail. A maiden's heart is a complicated thing.

"I shall focus on healing my wounds. Being able to recuperate in tranquility surrounded by ladies like this is quite the privilege."

"As a reminder, all the women in this room other than Anastasia are mine."

"I do not belong to you… In fact, you're my knight, so doesn't that make you mine?"

"That is a crazy embarrassing appraisal that makes me insanely happy!"

Emilia touched her finger to her lips as she made a rather bold statement that left Subaru feeling equal parts elated and anxious as he turned back to Julius.

He knew the mountain before him would take time to overcome. But he was checking if he at least had the room to

breathe and line up at the first station on the route.

"Anyway, while you're resting, you might feel the urge to curl up into a fetal position while thinking about what happened, but don't forget Patlash is watching."

"Do not worry. I would not do something so unsightly. It would be too inelegant."

"…Got your groove back, huh?"

"Mmm."

Getting an answer that sounded like the usual Julius, Subaru felt a little relief, and his expression softened a bit.

I'm glad I didn't leave him alone on those long stairs.

If that had at least helped a little bit, then the experience of the massive embarrassment Subaru had suffered at the castle would at least have served some good.

"I'll be counting on you, Patlash."

With that last request to his trusty steed, Subaru left the green room with Emilia.

As they were leaving, Subaru could tell Patlash moved closer to Julius, and he heard Julius's wry laugh at Patlash taking up guard. She was a smart dragon and took her instructions very seriously.

With Julius's state of mind and Patlash's faithfulness, it should be fine not to worry about the people in the green room for now.

"…Should I freeze the door closed?"

"Again, I'm amazed at the power of your imagination, but I think I'd rather keep that as a last resort. I don't want to risk that upsetting the spirit of the room."

"Mm, yeah. Hee-hee, it was just a thought. I was mostly kidding."

Emilia stuck out her tongue cutely as she apologized for her joke. Subaru's lips softened at that reaction, but he did not mention that he was tucking away a mental note about that option.

"Either way, we should leave the green room to its spirit. From the look of things, Patlash's wounds are healing up nicely, so it shouldn't be too long for Julius, either."

"Mm-hmm, right. Julius's wounds… They aren't as bad as they look, so he should be better soon. It seems like that's Reid's style."

"…Good at holding back just enough, huh? We can't exactly let Julius hear that, though."

Emilia chose her words carefully, and Subaru scratched his head while agreeing.

Reid using chopsticks as a weapon was the ultimate sort of bad joke, but that was just how overwhelming his fighting strength was that he could toy with someone as genuinely powerful as Julius like he was just a child.

The first Sword Saint, the man who worked with the Sage and the Holy Dragon to defeat the Witch of Jealousy… Given it's a legendary hero like that, there's not much I can do other than accept it.

Him being a terrible role model of a legendary hero on a personal level is another story, though.

"For now, we should—"

"Focus on finding some way to overcome the second examination until Sir Julius's wounds are healed, right?"

A cold voice interrupted their conversation. Looking up, it was Ram, who was leaning against the wall of the passage, waiting for the two of them to come back. She had been forced to wait in the passage because of the limit on how many people could occupy the green room. Subaru scratched his cheek when she said what he had been thinking.

"Is my face really so expressive that you could tell exactly what I was thinking?"

"You just had a list of everything you were worried about pasted all over your face. Everyone and everything you are worried about at the moment are in that room right now, Barusu. That's all."

"That's not true. I'm worried about everyone here, not just the people in the green room. Emilia-tan and Beako obviously, but you, too, Big Sis."

"Hah!"

Subaru flashed a thumbs-up, but Ram just snorted derisively. He pouted a bit as Ram turned away and started walking while Emilia put her hand to her mouth and giggled.

"It's okay. Your feelings made it through to Ram."

"I think you're a bit biased, but if you say so."

Glancing at Emilia, who was smiling slightly, Subaru cracked his neck and started following Ram. She was headed toward one of the smaller rooms on the fourth floor.

Stepping into the room…

"You are late. You kept Betty waiting. Is Julius all right?"

"Don't worry. For the moment, it seems like he's over the hump. I'm sure he'll be worrying about all sorts of things, since he

has such a strong sense of responsibility, but he won't despair now."

"If you say so, then I suppose Betty will believe it. In which case, it's good to have one problem resolved."

Beatrice nodded, and Subaru nodded as well before looking around the room.

There were many empty rooms on the fourth floor, but this was the one their gear had been carried into, and it could be called their forward base inside the tower.

Sitting in a circle in the base were Subaru, Emilia, Ram, Beatrice…

"Shaula, I want to ask you some more about that jerk."

"Eep! You look scary, Master! But—but I don't hate when you get strict with me like that, either. It's just one more aspect of our love."

"So it would seem, Master. How lewd…"

"I'm being framed!"

…And they were joined by a squirming Shaula and Meili, who had gotten used to following her around. Ram blaming him for Shaula's crazed words was business as usual.

"Either way, first of all, thanks for your help looking for Julius. Even if I tell him not to bother, I'm sure he'll apologize himself later, but for now, he's safe."

"It's fine. Like I told him, I'm just glad we found him safely. I'm sure everyone else feels the same, right?"

"I would prefer not to be grouped with Lady Emilia."

"Eh?! What do you mean?!"

Taking the lead, Subaru tried to move the conversation along, but a difference of opinion between Emilia and Ram quickly derailed it.

"From your report, it is seemingly necessary for everyone who entered the tower to overcome the second examination. And yet Sir Julius challenged it again a second time on his own judgment. If a single misstep was made, this action would have inevitably caused a fracture between our camp and Lady Anastasia's."

"Because Julius's action might have led to everyone failing?"

"Yes. If that happened, everything we went through to this point would have been for naught. It is questionable whether the second-floor examiner would have allowed us to leave safely. Or that sham Sage there."

Ram glanced at Shaula after explaining herself to Emilia. Not

expecting to be drawn into the conversation, Shaula pointed at herself.

"Me? Sham Sage is seriously rude! I never claimed to be the Sage! My one and only name is Shaula, the name Master gave me! I'm for Master one hundred percent!"

"She is quite earnest, it would seem, Master."

"Quit looking at me when you say that! …And I can't say you're wrong about Julius, either."

Even if he did not really like how excessively she said it, considering the worst-case scenario, Ram's analysis wasn't wrong. Julius had exposed all of them to danger with his actions.

Even considering the fact that he didn't know the details of the examination yet. If anything, that made it all the more rash.

"I do not know Sir Julius nearly well enough to say it is unlike him. But even considering the Gluttony issue, he did not seem the sort of person to do something like that."

"I agree with that, but… My thoughts are different. Him screwing up like that is sort of like a male-only measles."

A disease everyone gets once. I'm not sure if I should really compare him running off on his own like that to it, but measles and chickenpox are a lot worse if you get them as an adult.

Especially since it can be deadly.

"This time, it wasn't fatal. Just call it good enough for now."

"…I just don't want to be tripped up by someone else."

Ram murmured softly as she looked away from Subaru.

"And you want to start a fight over that? Or do you want to talk things through? If you don't decide, I'm not going to keep up with this."

Just then Meili chimed in, stopping things there with the mood in the room on the verge of getting dark. Leaning against Shaula's side, she was listlessly playing with her braided hair while looking around the room.

"If possible, could you not fight? I don't like pain or scary things."

"You… No, you're right. It's good having someone who can look at things with an outside perspective."

"Really? Heh-heh-heh, then be grateful."

Meili smiled a childish, innocent smile befitting her tender youth when Subaru thanked her.

Despite her youth, Subaru thought her independent view on

things was valuable. Thinking back, it had been her suggestion that they retreat from the second examination.

"I'll be counting on you going forward. It's important to have someone who can look at things with a cool head."

"So you say, but my job ended after we got through the desert, didn't it? There's nothing else I can do."

"But the more heads the better. And even if we made it through the desert, we're all still in the same boat here inside the tower. Just chalk it up as your misfortune and let me rely on you."

Meili was taken aback by Subaru's unvarnished admission of intending to ask her for help.

"I can understand why Petra is always worried."

"—? What about Petra?"

"Nothing. More importantly, weren't you going to interrogate the half naked lady?"

Meili's cheeks puffed out as she looked away. She stood up and started pushing Shaula's back. Shaula wasn't going to be moved by those frail arms, but she still excitedly moved forward, kneeling down right in front of Subaru and lowering her head to the floor.

"I am a fool, but please take care of me forever."

"Your admirable attitude is appreciated. Then, regarding a betrothal gift… Ow, ow, ow, ow! Emilia-tan?! Beako?! Why are you pinching me from both sides?!"

"Just because." "No particular reason."

Subaru had no intention of being pinched for no reason, but Emilia's and Beatrice's moods made him think twice about pressing the point.

"A-anyway, there's no mistaking that guy up there is Reid Astrea. So as a witness who knew him personally, I want to ask you, what sort of person was he?"

"Absolute trash."

"You said that before, and we have confirmation ourselves having seen him."

Shaula's lips curled into an unpleasant look as she remembered the dead. The dead man just upstairs aside, it was clear she could think of plenty of bad memories.

I guess that goes without saying since she straight-up fainted when she saw him.

"We have to get past him somehow. I want to get as many clues as we can for how to clear the second floor's examination."

“Tell us about anything you can think of, no matter how small. Sword Saint Reid’s personality, habits, relations, likes, dislikes, weak points. Particularly his weak points. Talk.”

“You’re really layin’ it on thick! You think I wouldn’t have gotten back at him if I knew his weak points?! He doesn’t have any!”

“Tch. Useless.”

“This girl’s even more overbearing than you, Master…”

Shaula pouted at Ram’s high-pressure attitude, but she just shrugged in response to Ram’s glare and then dashed behind Subaru to use him as a shield.

“Why are you hiding? You’re definitely stronger.”

“It’s not about stronger or weaker. Probably because you’re scared, though, Master. I can feel it because our hearts are linked.”

“Don’t blame me for you being scared.”

Subaru, unable to relax as he felt something soft push against his back, grabbed Shaula by the neck and forcibly dragged her to where she had been before.

He started to resume the questioning, but…

“Um… In the end, you don’t know anything about the examinations, right, Shaula?”

“Of course not. Just that this isn’t the time to say something is all. Most likely, it will be revealed after all the tower’s mysteries are solved.”

“I see… That’s *reeeally* exciting.”

“Emilia-tan is naive, so don’t trick her.”

“Even if you don’t know the Sword Saint’s weakness, what about habits or something? If he has any particular habits while fighting, we might be able to use it to beat him.”

“Habits, huh? Now that you mention it, when I tried to kill him for groping me, he kept scratching his butt while we were fighting! That’s something, right?”

“I think that was just him taunting you…”

“Also, he’s weak against pretty women. I bet he would let pretty women through.”

“In which case, it would be just me and Julius left behind? That’s a terrifying thought.”

“Maybe if you squint really, really hard…and someone pokes him in the eyes for good measure. Then he might think you’re pretty enough to pass…maybe…!”

“You’re cute to say that.”

When Beatrice tried her best to come up with a solution that wouldn’t hurt his feelings, Subaru wrapped her up in his arms and rubbed her head.

“Either way, Emilia getting a pass was just a fluke. It was a lucky combination of him letting his guard down and the challenger being Emilia, I suppose.”

“Why do you say that?”

“If Emilia had attacked to kill, he would never have let her attack hit him. So he let his guard down, and Emilia won.”

“Huh? Did you just compliment me?”

“Betty did.”

“Ah, I thought so. Heh-heh. Thank you. That makes me *reeeally* happy.”

Emilia celebrated Beatrice’s flattering analysis and the implied compliment while Subaru rewarded Beatrice with another head rub.

“It sounds cool saying his reaction changes depending on whether there is an intent to kill, but that’s just a given because of who he is. There’s no saying how serious he was or will be.”

“…His expectations need to be turned upside down. Barusu is right; we don’t know how demanding he will be, but we cannot allow him to get serious.”

“We can’t…let him get serious?”

Picking up on that thought, Subaru furrowed his brow. Ram was still deep in thought as she continued.

“Correct. Lady Emilia was acknowledged by the examiner because she managed to convince him to offer significant concessions and then cleared the new bar… The standard for passing the examination is quite fickle.”

“I agree the line is fuzzy. It reflects the examiner’s temperament.”

“So we have to make it so he enjoys himself while also setting out a standard that is sufficient for the examination. Doing that and then making the examiner lose is the requirement for clearing the second floor.”

Hearing that explanation from Ram, it clicked for Subaru.

With the one-step clause, a colossal number of attacks, and a little bit of luck, Emilia clawed out a victory—even if it was only after Reid let his guard down and with the most lenient possible conditions for her. We should probably assume that winning by brute force is impossible

now.

"Still, though, it's not like we can just say best two out of three at rock-paper-scissors, either…"

"Um, working at finding conditions that Reid will accept… Put that way, this examination is also a really difficult test."

"Difficult, but more like this is a really sadistic test in an entirely different way from the one on the third floor."

After testing knowledge (from a different world), now it is testing strength (against the world's strongest). In both cases, the real goal of the examinations is something different from the surface level.

So even if the two tests are different, they are both clear manifestations of the maliciousness of the Sage who made this tower.

And…

"—It's not like there's a rush, is there? You can just take your time and have fun with me."

"Even if you say that."

While Subaru looked around the room in thought, Shaula, who was casually sitting cross-legged on the ground, cheerfully chimed in. Subaru's face stiffened, but she did not mind it. Her eyes were just gleaming happily.

"You all can just stay here as looong as you want. Since I waited hundreds of years for you to come, Master."

"That's…"

"Take as long as you need, and just clear the examinations normally. I'll always be watching. However many days, years, or centuries it takes."

There was a weight to her words that could not just be laughed off.

She was in a good mood and smiling, beaming with affection for them—or rather, for Subaru, but her words also contained the weight of the centuries she had spent waiting.

The weight of the guardian who had protected the tower for hundreds of years in obedience to the Sage's directions.

Shaula had said it.

It was forbidden to leave without completing the examinations. If that rule was broken, even if it was Subaru who she adored as her master, she would not show any mercy.

Even if she is friendly, even if she is affectionate, that doesn't mean she is an ally.

When it comes to clearing the Pleiades Watchtower, the person

tasked as the Star Guardian… Shaula is…

"Just have fun with me here!"

…not an ally who can be trusted.

Subaru felt it painfully clearly when he saw her smile there.

2

—In the end, they held off on making a decision with their planning meeting for clearing Electra.

From the way things were going, they were not going to make any sort of real breakthrough in terms of plans, but the biggest reason they put off a decision was Subaru's stomach rumbling.

"Now that I think about it, I woke up after two days and then immediately started trying to clear this tower, didn't I…? My stomach is aching bad.

While the conversation was stalled, his stomach gurgled loudly, and for the first time, he realized just how hungry he was.

I can't fight on an empty stomach… Well, technically I can, but being hungry does mess with your ability to focus and think.

And as a result of that rumble, they decided to move elsewhere.

"Honestly, it was probably for the best that happened anyway…"

A plan for the second floor, the general theme of the examinations here, the test maker's sadism coming into focus, and the clearer idea of just how dangerous Shaula is—she already merited close attention from how strong she was, but her blockheadedness and the way she so easily gets along with us completely defused our sense of caution.

“You can just take your time and have fun with me.”

Days, years, or even centuries…

Or I guess it’s more, the way she so unabashedly said that helped me finally remember just how dangerous she is.

“I don’t intend to do it, but if for some reason we stop here at the tower and leave, she’ll become our enemy…”

I’d rather avoid that. Both because of the cold calculus of combat strength and for sentimental reasons.

Aside from her, though, thinking about clearing this place… There are all kinds of concerning points weighing on my mind.

They had already spent more than a month on their trip to the Pleiades Watchtower. Even if they took care of the challenges straightaway and finished clearing the tower, it would still take another month to get back to Pristella, making it an almost three-month trip even in the best case.

Besides the fact that stopping would mean fighting Shaula, I don’t really want to give up just because the trip is running long, but the royal selection is a hard deadline for Emilia and Anastasia.

Three years in total—it had already been a little over one year, meaning there were less than two years left. They didn’t have the luxury of infinite time.

“But worrying about stuff that far out won’t solve anything, either. The first thing you always need to do is to plant your feet firmly in the ground today in preparation for tomorrow. And for that—”

“—I should eat up so I’m not hungry.”

“Correct.”

Beatrice had interrupted Subaru’s words with her finger held up.

His stomach rumbling had been the impetus for ending the conversation, so he was taking a stroll around the tower—more specifically, the fourth floor they had made their living area—while waiting for food to be ready.

Accompanying him, holding his hand tightly while they walked, was Beatrice.

Holding hands regularly was so that Beatrice, Subaru’s contracted spirit, could collect mana directly from him, since his gate was deficient.

“Besides, you were worried about me while I was asleep these two days, right? Today, you can relax, and I’ll dote on you all you want.”

“What a silly thing to say. This is just collecting an extra surplus of mana to make up for you slacking off while asleep. Betty wants to be in top condition at all times in this tower. To avoid being unprepared.”

“So you say, but you still held my hand without absorbing mana while I was asleep.”

“That had nothing to do with mana. It was for topping up Betty’s heart, so it’s unrelated.”

She was proudly asserting it had nothing to do with mana, but Subaru thought that just made it all the more adorable and embarrassing, so he refrained from commenting on it.

Either way, he was in complete agreement with what she was saying. The strength of their combination was in more subtle tricks. That would surely come in handy on the second-floor examination and whatever awaited them in the first floor’s examination, too.

“All right, Beako. I’m fine. So absorb my mana until you’re big and bloated!”

“Betty won’t get big and bloated from absorbing lots of mana! And there’s not much point in you getting all enthusiastic about it since it is not as if you have that much mana to begin with.”

“Whoa, hey now. What should I do then?”

“That! Is! Why! You should at least eat up and rest properly to restore your stamina and build up mana reserves. And devote yourself to taking care of Betty. That is your responsibility.”

“So basically like I’m recovering from getting sick. And also there was a trace of your loneliness at being left alone that seeped in there… Whoops.”

Subaru managed a flexible expression that was half frustrated and half smiling at Beatrice’s adorableness. And in front of them, at the end of the passage, someone suddenly turned the corner.

It was Emilia, whose eyes widened when she saw them. In her hand was a metallic container…a bucket.

“A bucket? Still focused, even at a time like this, huh? Practicing music?”

“Heh-heh, what are you saying? It’s true mister bucket is always helping me with my music practice, but I know this isn’t the time for that.”

“That’s true. So then why the bucket?”

“Mister bucket is helping with his intended job.”

Smiling at Subaru’s question, Emilia held out the bucket.

Oh, it’s full of water, so I guess mister bucket is back to his old job.

But that just raised another question.

“Where did the water come from? It’s desert all around the tower, right?”

“Ah, that’s not true. If you go way, way past the tower, you’ll reach the great waterfall, and there’s a *reeeally* big amount of water there…”

“You went that far to get a single bucketful of water? For me?”

“I would do that much if it was for you, but that’s not what happened this time. The spirit in the green room actually provided us nice and clean water. Neat, right?”

Emilia seemed proud of the source of the water, but it was the line before that that made him happy.

Being willing to go all the way to the great waterfall to get water for his sake. That meant a lot.

“While I’m digesting all that happiness, though… That spirit is really something. Not just healing wounds, it can even do something like this?”

“If it was just making water, Beatrice or I could manage somehow with magic, but…”

“The miasma in the air in the desert and here is too dense. It would be wisest to avoid using mana that has been exposed to it for so long to create drinking water if possible.”

Their explanations cleared up some things.

During the trip, they had taken care of drinking water using magic. As long as there was mana, there was no reason to carry heavy water in large amounts. For certain things, the convenience of magic was incomparable.

“So sort of like atmospheric pollution…or I guess mana pollution caused by miasma? I guess it would be bad to drink water from that then?”

“It is not as if there is some immediate dramatic impact on the body. But imbibing significant amounts will lead to outsize internal miasma buildup. In the worst case, it could lead to developing the same sort of demon beast–attracting trait that you have. The thought makes Betty shiver.”

“It is definitely pretty hard to live with that trait, if I do say so

myself…”

He had made the best of it in all sorts of bad pinches, but it would never be beneficial except in very specific situations.

Even just going for a hike, you might end up suddenly surrounded by them. It would be better not to end up like this.

“So we’re using water purified by the green room spirit as much as possible. We did that the two days you were sleeping, too.”

“Huh, you don’t say?”

Subaru was impressed at the explanation of living conditions that had been going on while he was unconscious.

“Still, though, even with water, there’s a limit to food. We only prepared food stores for about a month before we entered the desert.”

“Mmm, right.”

“But it’s not like I plan on still being here in a month.”

Subaru smiled as a little bit of concern appeared in Emilia’s eyes.

We have a time limit, and there are lots of difficult problems, but nothing will get better sitting back and getting overwhelmed.

“Besides, it’s just been one day—or three I guess, since I just had a late start—and we cleared the first examination, and you made it through the second one no sweat.”

“It wasn’t that easy…”

“It’s okay to say it was easy, since we can pull out bluffs and tricks here.”

Holding up a finger pompously, Subaru pulled Beatrice’s hand, moving her and then resting his chin on her head. The two of them looked up at Emilia.

“It doesn’t matter if the enemy is the strongest Sword Saint ever. That one-eyed chopstick pervert asshole… Between my tricks and Beako’s strength, we’ll beat the tar out of him.”

“Right. Beat the tar out of him.”

“Beat the tar out of him…”

“That’s a phrase you don’t hear too much anymore.”

“No fair! You and Beatrice were the ones who just said it!”

Emilia’s cheeks reddened when she realized she had fallen into their trap.

Emilia looked a little bit unhappy at being dragged into a new twist on their old pattern, but she sighed, probably telling herself this was how it went sometimes.

“Mm, got it. I understand. It sounds almost simple when you say it. But it’s reeeally reassuring to hear.”

“Yeah, just have faith, expectations, and love for me. That’s why I became your knight.”

“Right, I’m counting on you, my knight.”

“You didn’t deny the love part, so now I’m at a loss for what to say…”

“…?”

Subaru wasn’t sure what to do when his half-joking request for love passed without comment. *But if she had actually accepted it, I would have been at least as shaken, so I guess it’s okay.*

Either way…

“It’s a bit late now, but you being the one to get the water is weird. This is a knight’s job… Well, I guess not really, but it definitely fits more on the retainer side of the lady/retainer equation.”

“It’s fine. You’re my knight, but I don’t want to have that sort of relationship. I want you to stay beside me. As long as you do that, it’s fine. Just let me take care of getting the water while you are recovering.”

“What’s this?! I might just die of a happiness overload!”

“Also, I’m in charge of dinner tonight! I want to take care of everything myself!”

“That is the difficult thing with Emilia. They both sound like they might be the real reason.”

Beatrice sighed at Emilia’s energetic response. And the familiarity of their exchange was a relief for Subaru.

I don’t have time to be getting dejected.

3

“This stupid tower… There isn’t a map, but I’m sure if there were one, it would be in the most annoying place. I hate these kinds of buildings that feel like they were a mess from the initial design stages…”

That was Subaru’s conclusion after having walked around the tower with Beatrice to get a feel for things while waiting to eat.

“What are you saying now? Given how nasty the examinations are, there is not much point commenting on how twisted the person who made it all is. It has been clear for a while.”

“Ah! You were bad-mouthing Master just now! This shrimp just badmouthed Master, who made this tower! If you think you’ll get it easy for being a kid, you got another thing coming! She deserves to be scolded! And all coddling that hasn’t been collected on should be given to me!”

“Give it a rest already…”

Shaula triumphantly leaped at Beatrice’s grumbling,

It wasn’t even really grumbling, but it would be a pain to explain it.

“Come on. Don’t keep causing a fuss. You too, Shaula. Behave.”

“Ehhh, I can’t accept that. This is discrimination. Discrimination, I say.”

“If she really did something bad, then Subaru would properly scold her. And it’s only normal to take special care of little children. You and I both just have to accept that, Shaula.”

“Betty does not like the idea of being treated as a child like it’s only natural…”

“Now, now, this is the time to show the magnanimity that comes with age.”

Subaru laughed wryly as he tried to soothe Beatrice’s ruffled feathers.

They had gathered again at the base to eat. Everyone who wasn’t still unconscious was present, meaning…

“May I say one thing before we begin eating, Lady Emilia?”

Julius, who had been the last to come to the room, interjected.

He had been thrown into the green room to focus on healing, but him showing his face wasn’t because he had an empty stomach.

Emilia, who had arranged everything for the meal, nodded.

“Of course, go ahead. I don’t have a reason to say no.”

“With Lady Anastasia not present, you are the person who should be most respected here, Lady Emilia. And yet, I have already caused you such trouble through my selfish actions. Though it is woefully late, I must address it.”

Julius shook his head while elegantly elaborating.

That stuffy, formal, chivalrous sort of thought was more and more like his usual self, but there was also someone there who did not take it particularly nicely.

“How laudable. If only you had understood that sooner.”

“Ram…”

“We already get enough mindlessness from Barusu. It is only natural to lose faith in someone who acts without thinking. I hope

you can convince us you won't do it again."

Ram icily addressed Julius's impulsive decision in the harshest terms. The coldness in her eyes was the same as usual, but her expression felt stiffer than normal. They were harsh words, but they were softened a bit by concern in her own way.

"Ram, that was too much."

"…My humblest apologies, Lady Emilia. I shall be more careful henceforth."

Ram apologized when Emilia called her out.

She's more on edge than usual, so it would be a mistake to blame her for that. It's not like she hates or despises Julius. She just wants to save Rem and do all she can to make that happen.

"I have caused you much trouble, Ms. Ram, and everyone else as well."

Understanding that, Julius recognized that her harshness was the just deserts he had earned and bowed his head without argument.

Taking responsibility like that was what he had wanted to do before the meal began.

Subaru sort of understood the impetus of Julius's rash decision, so Subaru had already been able to forgive him, but Julius forgiving himself was a different story.

This is a necessary first step toward that.

"All right! Julius apologized, and I accept. So as far as I'm concerned, this conversation is over."

With a clap of her hands, Emilia answered Julius's apology. Subaru nodded as well, of course, as did Beatrice.

"I already said what I wanted to say, so the rest is just a samurai's mercy."

"Same for Betty. Just make it up with your efforts going forward."

"…Sorry…"

Julius closed his eyes at their responses.

After them, Meili was the next to react. She was sitting on the ground with her legs splayed out, playing with her hair.

"No one ended up dying, so that's good enough, isn't it? Mister knight doesn't really bother me."

"If Master says no problemo, then that's enough for me. No espresso."

"You've got the wrong word there…"

Meili's response was disinterested, probably more out of genuine disinterest than any intention of being nice. And Shaula was probably being honest, too.

And…

“

“Indeed… Why are steamed potatoes special, Betty wonders.”

Ram frowned, as if a bit unsure what she said herself. Subaru let out a tiny sigh.

Ram’s skills in every sort of chore paled in comparison to Rem’s. But with all memory of Rem erased from the world, Subaru understood that fact quite literally did not exist anymore.

In truth, Ram could do pretty much anything she set her mind to. That didn’t just apply to her work as a maid. The loss of Rem likely had nothing to do with that.

Even while Rem was still conscious, Ram could have done the jobs if she had decided to do them.

But it wasn’t only her natural slacker tendencies that kept her from doing it.

“

“Your true ambition is showing.”

“I understand how you feel, Shaula. But the path of cooking is *reeeally* difficult and perilous. If you have the resolve despite that, then I’ll consider taking you on as an apprentice.”

“You’re really audacious when it comes to the strangest things sometimes, Emilia-tan.”

Ram probably made about three quarters of the food. Emilia talking big about the depths of cooking and Shaula getting way too impressed by amateur cooking are both pretty hilarious.

“But our food supply is going to be an issue…”

It was a troubling problem for Subaru.

Before his eyes, Shaula was grinning and almost in tears as she stuffed her mouth, and Emilia’s nurturing instincts were stimulated seeing that, so she would surely add more food going forward.

I had counted on one month as our time limit considering the food we had, but…

“We might not have even that long, at this rate…”

4

They finished their dinner, cleaned themselves using the spring water (mostly just wiping down their bodies), and then split up for the day. It was time for bed.

Now that I think about it, a chaotic all-night meeting to figure out how to clear this tower might have been the right way to approach things, but it’s also hard to imagine coming up with an answer that way right now.

Future me will just have to find a solution to those problems, even if that’s a bit too easygoing.

“It’s not like it’s a problem where a solution is gonna just randomly present itself. We’ll need to take our time with this test.”

It is what it is. Worst case, there is the option of just challenging it again tomorrow without any extra planning. Just trial and error rather than trying to approach it from every angle—what happens in the event of a fatal error is concerning, but at the very least that asshole doesn’t seem to be intent on killing us.

And we might even find a clue while talking to him, like how Emilia managed to get concessions by just asking.

“Even so, we still need to be able to analyze what comes, so that means eating and sleeping enough to be able to function at peak performance.”

Rubbing his cheeks with both hands, Subaru tried to shake off all the various issues that were troubling him.

So we’re done for the night. Everyone is going back to the carriage to sleep in preparation for tomorrow, but…

“Subaru, Betty will be with Emilia and the others in the carriage.”

“Mm? Ah, right. Sorry, Beako. Don’t stay up all night or it will keep you from growing. If you stayed small forever… Well, you’d still be cute. All right, make sure you stay up all night.”

“You needn’t worry. Betty won’t grow any larger than this. She’ll be cute forever, so going to bed early isn’t a problem.”

Beatrice yawned and waved casually as she left. She was holding Emilia’s hand as she walked away.

“Take care of her for me, Emilia-tan. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Mm-hmm, see you tomorrow. You shouldn’t stay up too late, either.”

With that, and without blaming him for staying up late in the first place, Emilia headed down the great stairs to the lower floor. Seeing them off, Subaru stretched a bit and walked through the hall on the fourth floor.

His goal was easy to find. The vine-covered door to the green room.

There…

“Subaru?”

“…Oh, it’s you.”

In front of the room, he ran into Julius, whose eyes widened seeing him.

Julius had just been heading into the green room himself, and his eyes narrowed for a moment seeing Subaru, but he quickly nodded in understanding.

“I see. It appears we both came here with the same intentions.”

“Though for different people… Should I leave it to you for tonight?”

“No, I should yield to you. You were unconscious for two days. You were able to confirm her safety, but I’m sure she was looking forward to the night as well.”

“…Well, if you’re going to say that, I won’t argue.”

Scratching his head awkwardly at that elegant circumlocution, Subaru glanced over at Julius.

It doesn't look like he's forcing himself, but I was never the best at reading people's faces. If he's hiding it, I wouldn't be able to tell.

"Are you okay with that? You must want to stay by her side."

Subaru heaved a sigh and just straight up asked what he was wondering.

Julius smiled faintly.

"Yes, if possible, I would like to be by Lady Anastasia's side until she wakes up. But when she does awaken, I hardly know what I should say to her first. I am also unsure of that."

"The first words should just be something like 'I'm glad you woke up. I was worried about you.' Right? The real problem is what you say after that. As for those words… Well, that's up to you."

"Heh."

"Why are you laughing? That was a pretty serious answer."

It had been a carefully considered answer, but it didn't seem to satisfy Julius. Turning on his heel, Julius faced away from Subaru, who looked hurt by the laugh.

"What an unrestrained idea. I'm jealous."

"It's annoying that it sounds like you're calling me an idiot. Hey, where are you going?"

"I yielded the room to you. I am returning to the carriage to rest. I am a little tired today."

Julius raised his hand while walking away.

He's recovered enough to say "a little tired" after what happened with the examination? Or is that just a front, too? I really can't tell.

I can't tell, but…

"Julius, it's better for you to wait for Anastasia to wake up. I'll wake you up when I'm done. You should wait for her."

"

pushed open the door, stepping into the green room. It was lit by a faint light, subsumed by a massive amount of green like always, and there were two girls sleeping on beds of grass inside.

The closest bed was Anastasia's, and farther in was Rem.

"And the farthest back is you."

Looking up, Subaru saw Patlash looking entirely natural, as if that state of things was expected. Not only that, but Subaru's trusty steed had left half the bed open, making space for Subaru to sit on the side next to the bed where Rem was sleeping.

"You are a land dragon who is wasted on a guy like me."

Laughing a bit, Subaru scratched his cheek and availed himself of Patlash's consideration, sitting on the bed and smiling softly at Rem, who was resting peacefully on her bed.

"Julius said she was waiting for night to fall…"

He's wrong, though.

That isn't it at all. Rem isn't the one waiting for a time when I can talk to her without any interruptions. It's me.

5

Subaru noticed the change when he felt his shoulder jolt.

"…Ugh?"

Raising his head, he slowly stood up.

His consciousness found its way back to reality, escaping the fog of dreams.

"I was…asleep?"

Putting his hand to his chin, he was surprised that he had been sleeping.

He must have passed out at some point while talking to Rem. Because he had laid his head down, there were marks on his cheeks from the leaves. Running his fingers over them…

"I must have been pretty tired, too…huh, Patlash?"

Subaru turned to look at the reason he had woken up. Patlash had batted him with her tail. *Why did she wake me up?*

But he did not have to ask his beloved dragon to get the answer. It was obvious to see.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed something strange and did a double take.

"…No way…"

Of the two beds in the room, one—the one Anastasia had been

sleeping on—was empty. Subaru felt a chill.

"A-after I said all that to Julius…"

Because I took a nap, I didn't even notice her going… No, it's not just that.

"She woke up… So then what…? Where did she go? The bathroom? Without waking me up?"

Anastasia—or more precisely Echidna—leaving the green room without saying anything to Subaru, who was asleep there, too, wasn't a good situation.

Why did she do that? It shouldn't be the same reason Julius went out on his own, but…

"The bed is still a little warm… I have to find her."

It's still warm, and also Patlash woke me up. She probably didn't leave that long ago.

"Patlash! Watch Rem for me! And thanks for waking me up!"

Waving at her short whinny, Subaru raced out of the room.

His mind was racing, but he could not imagine where Anastasia would be going. If it were him, the first thing he would want to do was make sure Emilia and Beatrice and the others were safe, so in her case that would mean checking on Julius first.

"But she's Foxidna now. She wouldn't be that straightforward. In which case…"

I can't cover it all myself. It's embarrassing that I fell asleep like that, but I should let the others know so we can all look for her…

"Huh?"

He was about to go downstairs to alert everyone when he caught his breath.

It was a stunned, confused reaction. A reaction to seeing something unexpected, something that should not have been there.

"

Sensing that something was definitely not adding up, Subaru frantically chased after the bird, which was getting farther and farther away.

He had hesitated for just a moment, unsure whether he should tell someone about Anastasia's disappearance and the bird and if he should ask for help.

But Subaru chose to follow the bird. His instincts were telling him that if he lost sight of it, something terrible could happen, so he obediently gave chase.

Of course, the bird wasn't kind enough to slow down just because Subaru asked. It continued to fly gracefully through the passage, leaving him behind as it moved farther and farther into the distance.

Subaru chased and chased with all his might, and finally…

"—?! It disappeared? That's impossible."

Subaru's voice cracked when he reached the end of the passage.

The hallway was an arc that followed the outer wall of the tower, but it did not connect in a single loop. About halfway through the loop, there was a wall blocking the way forward.

Using a clock as a reference, there was a wall connecting twelve o'clock and six o'clock, creating a block no matter which side they were approached from. Already knowing that, Subaru had assumed he would be able to catch the bird unless it could somehow open a door or get inside a room, but…

"It doesn't seem like it flew into the wall, either. What happened…?"

Unable to find a trace of where the bird disappeared to, Subaru looked around in confusion.

Unfortunately, he could not find a room nearby that the bird might have escaped to. It had suddenly appeared, and it had suddenly disappeared, too. It almost felt like a dream, but…

"…This is a feather, right?"

Picking up a white feather that had fallen to the floor, Subaru got evidence that the bird really had been there. He could at least take that back to the others to say that the bird had existed. But that did not solve anything.

There aren't any clues as to where Anastasia disappeared to…

"No, wait… There has to be something here, where the feather was…"

Thinking that, Subaru started looking all around the floor and

the walls near where the feather had been. He touched, poked, and prodded the stone floor, ceiling, walls, and rooms nearby.

But there did not seem to be anything hidden, and he started getting impatient as time passed. *I really should have called for someone…*

Just as he thought that—

"Ah?!"

He touched the floor where the feather had been with his palm. Just when his fingers were about to brush against the wall, they passed right through it.

It wasn't an optical illusion. Slowly holding out his hand, he could not touch the wall.

"I'm sure I checked this wall already…"

Making sure he wasn't going crazy, Subaru touched the wall again. The wall was there from his waist up, but below that point, it was a trick.

An illusion that seemed to block an entrance. It reminded him of the cultists Petelgeuse led who had created a hideout in a cavern using a similar trick.

"Nothing ventured… How many times is this now?"

Crawling on all fours, he was able to slip under the wall. He hesitated for a moment before deciding to go through and see what came of it.

The bird probably passed through here, flying low to the ground. If it goes outside or connects to another part of the tower…

"Pwuaah!"

It was dark after passing through the wall, but it was shorter than he had expected.

Passing through the fake wall, Subaru inhaled like he was coming up for air. For no particular reason, he had held his breath while crawling through the darkness.

And he noticed the outside air—a cold breeze—against his face.

"…Ohhh…"

Opening his eyes, he slowly let them adjust to the outside after the dark passage.

What he saw before him was a scene looking out at the night desert from a place far, far higher than he could have imagined. There was a black sky filled with shimmering stars.

And…

"

On what could be called the tower's balcony were Anastasia, her light purple hair swaying in the wind, and dozens of birds all around her.

6

"And at the other end of the tunnel was a land of snow."

It was a joke that did not really describe the odd scene before him at all.

He had passed through a wall and not a tunnel, and it wasn't a land of snow, but a cold desert breeze and the night sky that awaited him. Stars shone bright while a black sea of the desert extended far, far into the distance all around them.

None of it connected to what he said at all. Instead…

"…Natsuki?"

Hearing Subaru's hoarse murmur, someone with light purple hair fluttering in the breeze turned toward him.

She gently held down her hair as her green eyes met Subaru's. It was just the person he had been looking for.

"…It's a great spot for a view on a night stroll."

Hiding his shock, Subaru shrugged at Anastasia as he changed the subject. Anastasia smiled slightly.

"Yeah. It's definitely a nice view. But it's a shame the scenery itself is all black. It would have been different if there were at least a town to see in the distance."

"Well now, I don't know about that. It's not so bad. Like the sea at night. And more than anything…"

Subaru pointed up instead of out. Drawn by that, Anastasia looked up at the night sky filled with stars.

"The air is cool and clear, so the stars look super bright. It's pretty romantic, right?"

"The stars surely are lovely… I guess because at this height we're above the miasma hanging over the desert? Looks like we can see the stars that were hidden before."

Looking up, Anastasia's lips softened. Seeing that, Subaru stopped about five yards away.

And…

"…So what's your excuse?"

"Excuse?"

"Slipping out of bed in the middle of the night, slipping into a

secret passage no one knows about, all so you can enjoy the night breeze and play with some birds? That's way too suspicious."

Anastasia had a curious look on her face, but Subaru doggedly followed up.

The birds…

It was just Subaru and Anastasia face-to-face there, but a proper crowd was watching them on the balcony: birds that did not budge at all, watching silently like dolls.

And not just one or two, a disturbing number of them. Lining the edge of the balcony, there were at least fifty birds resting their wings. There was a flock's worth of birds. A flock's worth instead of an actual flock, since they were not all the same species.

White, blue, black, speckled, big, small, thin, fat. There was no unifying principle to the crowd of birds. That alone was already strange, but even eerier to Subaru was how they moved.

Even though there are this many birds, I don't hear any bird calls, and I can't even hear wings rustling.

The wildly varied birds were all united in silence, just sitting there.

"It makes sense why you might be uneasy about that, but…" Anastasia put her hand to her cheek. "But secret passage is selling it a bit hard, ain't it? You wound up here, too, didn't you?"

"That's… The bird guided me here, ish."

"Which is the same as me. I was wanderin' around the tower for a stroll when a bird came flyin' by. I followed it after wonderin' what was goin' on, then found myself here."

Anastasia's eyes narrowed as she spread her arms and mimicked a bird flying.

It went without saying that wasn't a convincing explanation. Subaru did not have any evidence to disprove it, but he refused to believe such a convenient story, putting himself up on a special pedestal in the process.

"These birds—"

"What's with these birds?"

"Ngh. That's what I want to ask."

Her evasiveness is really uncomfortable, and the way that the birds all feel like they're quietly watching us seriously bothers me. I can't read anything in their eyes.

The birds, the balcony… What is she thinking?

"Is that the bird that was flying during the sand time?"

“These are definitely the birds Ram used her Clairvoyance on. I don’t know what happened to them after we reached that field of demon beasts…looks like they made it here safely, though.”

Anastasia’s lips curled ever so slightly into a wry smile as she tickled the throat of the bird. The bird did not react, and Anastasia sighed.

“They’ve been like this the whole time. I’m pretty much puzzled by it.”

“From my experience, it’s basically impossible for me to believe that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Whenever I run into some sort of situation like this carelessly, it’s pretty much always life-threatening.”

He had a wealth of experience when it came to careless actions that led to near-death experiences.

The oldest was when he went wandering around the mansion at night and got himself beaten to death by Rem. Omitting many, many other examples, Subaru had more or less come to the conclusion that careless actions always lead to danger. And his current situation was extremely dangerous…

“Relax. I’m not thinkin’ about anything like that. I don’t have any hostility toward you. Or anyone else in this tower…Well, except the examiners.”

“Shaula and Reid?” Anastasia’s expression soured when Subaru said their names, and he noticed. “Ah, right, you didn’t hear since you were asleep. The guy on the second floor… That’s Reid Astrea. The first Sword Saint. Apparently, he was summoned from the past, or at least that seems like what’s happening.”

“This tower sounds more and more crazy the longer we’re here… What was the guy who made it thinking?”

Hearing that, Anastasia responded with a stunned reaction, followed by a short follow-up. Sensing the Kararagi accent slipping from her tone, Subaru inhaled sharply.

Up to then, he had by and large interacted with her as if she were Anastasia, or at least that was what he had tried to do. But her real nature was…

“…It’s just the two of us here right now, so want to talk openly a bit?”

“Hmm…”

“Honestly, talking to you while you’re wearing someone else’s

skin is… Whatever you say, I won't ever be able to actually believe it. So…"

"You want to talk to me instead of me acting like Ana."

In an instant, Anastasia's tone changed as she responded to his proposition.

Her whole being transformed instantly like someone had flipped a switch. Even though she still looked exactly the same, it was like a completely different person was standing across from him. The feeling in her eyes, her thoughtful expression—it all changed.

"

“Your imagination is a lot more scary than they are. Don’t tell me that’s also your experience talking?”

“There was a time that a bunch of cute bunnies jumped me.”

Ever since then, he was always a bit nervous around large groups of animals gathered in one place.

I can say with confidence that there wasn’t any easy death in all my loops, but that memory was particularly bad.

“…With how pale your face is, I won’t force you to explain. I don’t feel particularly close to them, either.”

His face had apparently turned visibly pallid and convinced Echidna to quickly pull her hand back from the bird. Then, placing her hands on her knees, she looked at Subaru again.

“So then, you proposed talking openly… So what exactly did you want to talk about with me now that I’m not acting like Ana?”

“As a first topic, your connection to this place and these birds.”

“I can’t tell you anything different than the answer I gave as Ana. I was led here by a bird just like you were. To that end, I don’t really have any clue why. But…”

“But?”

Subaru was almost let down by that unchanged answer, but the slight hook at the end made him raise his eyebrows. Echidna hesitated for a moment at that reaction before continuing.

“Honestly, I’ve been meaning to ask you the exact same question.”

“Me?”

“Maybe it sounded like a joke in Ana’s tone? I ended up here because it was like I was being guided. And now that I’m here, I’m talking to you… You, standing between me and the way back into the tower.”

“

Ana decided to investigate you."

Echidna was revealing a part of the strategy that Anastasia's camp had worked on.

A theory for how to compete with her opponent Emilia and Emilia's knight, Subaru, who had just received a valorous commendation.

But even Anastasia Hoshin, the great merchant who lead the Hoshin Company…

"Your identity was a complete mystery. Ana grumbled that she only just had the barest level of information. And that was probably more about what the people around you had done than you yourself."

Hiding the details of my identity… If someone in our camp was actually involved in that, the obvious guess is Roswaal, followed by Otto or Clint.

"Either way, the furthest back she could find anything about you was right before the start of the royal selection, when you were involved in an incident that allegedly happened in the capital. According to Sir Reinhard's testimony about discovering Felt, who would become one of the candidates, apparently, you were involved somehow. But that's all."

There could not be records any further back than that.

With that final piece, Echidna's—or, in this case, Anastasia's—retracing of Subaru's footsteps was pretty much perfect.

Other than the fact that it was incomplete as far as she was concerned.

"

Seeing that reaction, Echidna nodded to herself with satisfaction.

“Yeah. Ana’s and my understanding of you is that you are an unknown, rookie knight who has achieved multiple great feats… That was where we stood until Pristella. But that impression changed a bit during the battle with the Witch Cult and the journey to this tower.”

“

believe her no matter how much she demonstrated her sincerity.

That was the residual stench of the Witch.

"I…get…what you are saying. I…understand. Whether I believe you or not…is a different matter…"

"It is really obvious how conflicted you are."

"For the sake of argument, say we met here by coincidence. So then what is this place? Why do you think there's a balcony here?"

"I have a theory about it. Three days ago…do you remember what happened in the desert?"

"Three days ago, so before we reached the tower? It's more than a little bit chaotic, but…"

"While we were being chased by oiran bears, we were attacked by a white light. Apparently, that was Shaula's work, right? So that's what this is."

"Her vantage point for watching the desert?"

Subaru snapped his fingers when Echidna finished.

Her hypothesis made sense. And Shaula had used what she called her Hell's Snipe to hit anyone who started to come close to the tower. *Thinking about it, I had wondered where she did it from since there weren't any windows or anything to look out from…*

"Most likely, there are several places just like this one all around the tower's outer wall. From the look of the desert out there, this isn't the angle we approached from."

"And the birds?"

"The birds are a puzzle. They don't react when I touch them. But they do seem to have body warmth, so they aren't fabrications. If possible, I'd like to autopsy one, but…"

Looking down at the bird beside her, Echidna's eyes were callous and cold. But she pulled her hand back and looked at her fingertips.

"I can't strain Ana's body any more than I already have. It would be simple if you strangled the bird for me, but…"

"If it's something that needs to happen at some point, then sure, I guess…"

Since being summoned to this world a little over a year ago, Subaru had gotten used to hunting birds and wild rabbits. Of course, killing something for food was a far cry from killing it for an experiment…

"Eating it after killing it would be more…"

"Right, there's also the problem of food stores. So I'd like to

request, say, twenty of them."

"I'm sure they would start moving if I killed one, wouldn't they?"

"…I can't deny that."

Echidna pensively covered her mouth when she heard Subaru's concern.

The birds did not react to their violent conversation. They simply watched the two outsiders in silence.

Subaru stopped himself from going further down that line of thought when the idea of a sky burial came up.

"If we're doing that, we should make proper preparations first. For now, it can wait."

"They don't seem like they'll run away, either. Okay, that's fine then. Honestly, it's hard to imagine learning anything useful from examining these birds anyway."

"Please stop saying things that make it sound like your inquisitiveness or lust for knowledge got the best of you."

"…?"

Echidna really did not seem to know anything about the Witch's temperament, but even so, the way her actions seemed to resemble the original made it impossible for Subaru to relax. So he ignored that and asked a question aimed more at the un-Witch-like spirit Echidna part.

"I didn't really check too deeply before, but what's going on with Anastasia?"

"…No changes yet. Ana is still sleeping deep in this body. I've never inhabited her body this long, either, so I'd be lying if I said I wasn't getting anxious."

"Anxious?"

"Like I told you before."

Echidna touched her borrowed body's chest, implying that Anastasia was sleeping in that location as she closed her eyes.

"It's been a month now that I've been borrowing her body. I didn't exactly take things lightly before, but…the feeling that her life is continually being shaved away is still heavy."

"

“Can she really take the throne with her body in that…messed-up condition?”

“Do you mean that Ana should give up her right in favor of your master?”

“Gh! This isn’t a joke! That’s not what I meant at all! I—”

“Ana will never withdraw. She won’t give up, either. I know that much.”

Subaru stepped forward and raised his voice, but Echidna sharply cut him off. Overwhelmed by the force of it, Subaru blinked. And then slowly, carefully…

“…Does Anastasia really want her own country that badly? Even if she might have to give it up again before long?”

“It might be shorter than the time an average person has, but Ana will use that short time far better than anyone else. And Ana has her own reason for not being able to give up on the throne.”

Subaru’s voice was weak, and Echidna’s was filled with faith in Anastasia.

And the reason for not giving up that she mentioned.

That was…

“Because that is what she wants.”

At some point, Echidna had stood up straight and walked over to Subaru, standing face-to-face with him in the middle of the balcony.

She said that while looking him straight in the eye. Subaru was frozen in place.

It was a different sort of weight from the Pleiades’s examination pushing down on him.

He could not move, and no words came to his lips. Echidna did not say anything, either.

With the two of them frozen there, the only sound that split the night air was the beat of wings from behind, coming to join the resting flock.

Another bird coming to the balcony…

From behind…

“

So then naturally, a third set of wings would also…

“What are…you talking about…?”

A voice that sounded almost dumbfounded, as if some core belief had been shaken.

At that sound, all the birds spread their wings at once and leaped into the air with a thunderous noise.

Taking to the night sky, toward the desert shrouded in darkness.

Leaving Subaru and Echidna feeling as if they had been left behind on a deserted island.

And Julius Juukulius as well.

CHAPTER 7

1

In the wake of the flock of birds leaving, an abyss descended over the balcony.

The unnatural-seeming birds did not hesitate to spread their wings and leap into the dark sky.

As if to say that falling into a sky that held no support was more comfortable than remaining there.

If that is what they felt, then Subaru 100 percent agreed. That was just how unexpected and awful the stifling situation was.

"What are you talking about?"

The air was electric with tension as Julius repeated himself without stumbling over his words.

The words were the same as his first dumbfounded question, but he had regained a bit of vigor. It was a sad demonstration of the strength of Julius's core.

—How much did he hear?

Subaru forced his brain back into motion only to quickly run into a problem. It was crucial to know how much Julius had heard.

The part about Echidna being Anastasia wasn't something to tell him without warning. And the secrets shared by Subaru and Echidna were too deeply rooted when it came to the effort to conquer the watchtower.

It involved artificial spirits, the Witch of Greed, and Gluttony's authority, among other things. Subaru had judged that telling Julius the details about the situation brought on by the mixture of all

those things would just cause confusion and pain.

Most of all the fact that Anastasia's conscience was slumbering, and the artificial spirit Echidna was inhabiting her body.

That's…

"Argh, Natsuki, stop it with that obvious look."

"…Huh?"

While Subaru froze, Echidna smiled elegantly while poking his chest gently.

Her tone and attitude were a perfect imitation of Anastasia, and for a moment, Subaru looked shocked, wondering what was happening.

Leaving him in the lurch, Echidna spun around.

"Sorry, Julius, but we weren't tryin' to leave you out. I was just talkin' with Natsuki a liiittle bit about some business for after we finish this trip."

"

“That’s not—”

“I was quite clear that I could not simply accept that.”

Julius drew the sword that he had replaced for his broken one and pointed its tip at Echidna’s white neck.

“Julius, wait! That’s…”

“You too, Subaru. I only wish to know the truth.”

Entirely calmly, Julius asked them to come clean.

Echidna caught her breath and could not move with the sword pointed at her. Her eyes looked at Subaru for some help, but he couldn’t think of any way of recovering, either.

“How much did you hear, Julius?”

“…From the part regarding Lady Anastasia’s body.”

Julius’s voice was hoarse as he answered the question.

Whatever he had heard was more than enough to make him emotional and lose any semblance of calm. But even so, at least on the surface, he was still keeping his cool.

Or else things had gone so far off the map that he had blown past getting emotional.

“…I’m an artificial spirit that has spent many years together with Ana. My name is Echidna.”

“

to mine. Though I did not particularly consider sharing everything at first, either. It was just…"

"… Just?"

"…He saw through the fact that I was pretending to be Ana. So I told him."

There was a powerful shock in Julius's eyes as he heard how Subaru came to be the only one who knew that Echidna was inhabiting Anastasia's body.

The reason Echidna had hesitated for a moment had to be because she had expected that reaction.

It was only natural. Subaru noticing Echidna's pretense meant…

"So something that could be noticed by an outsider of minimal connection should have been noticed by the man who regarded himself as her first knight, huh…?"

"Wait a second, dumbass! That isn't a fair thing to say at all!"

"

“Don’t tell me to discard it, please. I… Right now, the thought of even a single thing slipping away from me is absolutely terrifying.”

Subaru’s random attempt at consolation was easily swatted aside by the ideals of chivalry that Julius lived by. The feelings Subaru wanted to vent stopped in the back of his throat, and he could not say anything as Julius shook his head.

“Returning to the subject at hand… Echidna, what is your goal?”

“…To return this body to Ana. The primary reason I guided us to the Pleiades Watchtower was that rather than the victims of Gluttony and Lust.”

“So you do not desire the present state of affairs. Which means you have not found a means of restoring Lady Anastasia… What if I were to kill you?”

Julius’s eyes narrowed as he asked a dangerous question made all the more threatening by his sword still being pointed at Echidna.

She averted her eyes and touched her breast.

“I do not have any way to prove that I am not just an evil spirit that is making up excuses in order to take over Ana’s body. So if you decide that I am lying and try to exterminate me, I can’t stop you.”

Pausing for a moment there, Echidna continued—

“But the most likely case would be that Ana’s consciousness would not return, leaving just a husk of her former self… In the worst case, it might disrupt her bodily functions, and she could even die.”

She answered Julius’s hypothesis with her opinion and then raised her hands.

“Of course, that could just be me saying whatever I can in order to avoid dying. I cannot say for sure that my death would not resolve things. If that would grant Ana a long life, then I would not mind it. I don’t want to die, though.”

“Why would you go so far for Lady Anastasia?”

“Ana and I are incomplete. The relationship between a standard spirit and spirit mage might not be the right parallel to use as a comparison, but…”

Echidna looked between Julius and Subaru.

As if jealous of the two of them who were able to have proper relations with spirits.

“I love Ana. I’ve been by her side since she was just a small child. So I don’t ever want to abandon her. I want her to be happy. That’s my reason.”

“

Julius's observation was correct, and it was a thing that had bothered Subaru, too.

Her unyielding, desperate expression as she intervened when Julius was being pummeled. It did not look like something that was feigned or calculated.

It was pure and simple concern. It was something that was possible for Echidna to feel for Julius, having always been at Anastasia's side… But was that just it?

But in response to Julius's question and Subaru's thoughts, Echidna bowed at the waist.

"I'm sorry. I blundered. Um, it's embarrassing saying this as an amateur, but it was a strategic decision."

"A strategic decision?"

"At that point, I did not know anything about whether the examiner intended to kill or not. In the worst case, we might have completely lost the combat potential you represented. And Reid Astrea had his back to me… It looked like a chance. Though, not only did it not turn out well, it actually caused more problems. So… sorry."

With that, Echidna raised her body.

There was no contradiction in her explanation. If she called it an amateur's judgment leading to a careless action, Subaru couldn't exactly disprove it. Aside from the fact that it rang hollow on an emotional level.

But just as Subaru was about to push her on that, right before he could say something—

"Understood. I would ask you to refrain from rash acts going forward. For Lady Anastasia's sake."

"I understand."

"Wha—?!"

Julius seemed to be accepting that explanation, and Echidna nodded in response. Subaru's eyes widened at their exchange, and he stomped the ground.

"How can you just accept—?"

"I accepted it. And Echidna has agreed to refrain from rash acts going forward. What more is to be said? Apologies for your being caught up in this due to the circumstances. However, this is a problem between the two of us as members of Lady Anastasia's faction. It is not something for you to trouble yourself over."

Subaru grit his teeth as Julius tried to keep him out of the

problem.

Telling me not to trouble myself over it…

"It's my choice how I take things!"

"So you may take things as you wish, but you won't allow me to address my own problems? …Like how you chose not to tell me about Lady Anastasia and Echidna?"

"Ngh."

"Apologies, I've said too much… But it is the truth."

With that cold, quiet counter, Julius looked away.

Seeing Julius's unyielding stance and hearing his voice, Subaru finally realized it.

Julius was not calm at all.

Not only was he seething internally, he could not even completely feign calmness for appearances.

His existence was lost to the world, and the one thing that remained—his fealty—had been effectively denied, and the promise that had been made to him out of consideration had also been broken.

That he still didn't allow himself to become emotional despite all that was a testament to Julius's way of life.

"I have no intention of arguing. For Lady Anastasia's sake, it is necessary to find a means of resolving this situation as soon as possible. Echidna, I would like to get your full and complete support in that as well."

"…Yes. Given I couldn't hide it from you, there's not much reason for me to keep pretending to be Ana. Of course, only if I have your permission to speak in my own voice using Ana's body."

"It matters not. It will just be an even greater spur for me to work to return Lady Anastasia."

It was a terribly self-harming resolve, and Echidna looked saddened by it. But Julius was looking up at the sky and couldn't see it.

For the first time, he seemed to realize that the miasma did not block the night sky from the balcony, and his eyes narrowed as he looked at the twinkling stars.

"There is no reason to stay here any longer. We should return inside. Tomorrow, we must tell Lady Emilia and the others about Lady Anastasia's body and the truth about Echidna."

"Okay, I understand. I'll prepare myself for that."

With that, Julius gently took Echidna's hand as she started

moving. It was surely the exact same action he would have taken for Anastasia.

Whatever the contents of the body, his fidelity to Anastasia was unchanged. Even if she was slumbering deep inside her own body, and even if she had forgotten him completely.

“Julius!”

Feeling a sharp pain as he watched him go, Subaru called out.

Being forgotten from others’ memories, but them still remaining in your own head. Clinging to those feelings and desperately struggling… I understand that path painfully well.

“Even if I’m forgotten, I will never forget.” That feeling alone can be enough to spur you on.

“

“…But even so…”

He looked up to the sky, and he struggled to speak.

“…I did not want you or Lady Anastasia to think me unfit as a knight.”

2

Passing through the illusory wall and going back into the castle, Subaru was alone.

Julius and Anastasia—or rather, Echidna—had left the balcony, but Subaru had lingered, dumbstruck as the cold desert wind hit him.

He had been overwhelmed by what Julius had just said and could not bring himself to move.

“

“…Ahh, that. Well, yeah.”

“—?”

His eyes widened slightly at the Ram-like objection, and then he smiled bitterly.

It wasn’t as if she had guessed what he was thinking, but it was a prediction based on what he had done day in and day out for so long. She was right. He had passed more than a few nights beside Rem.

I even did tonight, too. It’s natural she would assume I’m coming back from that.

But it wasn’t just that today…

“Stop looking so pathetic.”

“Agh.”

“Dejected, pathetic. You are already a vulgar man, and that only makes it worse. You’ll bring Lady Emilia’s dignity into question for having you as her knight. Shape up.”

Ram flicked his forehead as he looked down.

The force of it made his eyes water, but his complaint was silenced, seeing Ram snort in disinterest. If anything, he was relieved…

“…I dunno, but that’s just like you, Ram.”

“Hah. Spare me your sickening thoughts.”

Ram’s expression furrowed in heartfelt disgust as Subaru rubbed his forehead. That her attitude was a relief just made him feel more pathetic.

It’s not like she even asked anything or tried to understand what’s going on.

“So what have you been doing, Ram?”

“Obscene.”

“Don’t try to end the conversation there. It was just getting started…”

Shrugging at that bristling response, Subaru exhaled a bit and then looked behind Ram—toward where she had been walking from.

The fourth floor was fairly big, but there were not really many eye-catching points, either. Just the green room, the luggage that had been brought up from the carriage, and…

“…The stairs to the second floor?”

“

win. He could understand if Ram had that in mind and had been waiting for Reid to go to sleep so she could sneak in and kill him.

The problem was even if they could pull off a sneak attack like that, it wasn't like they could do something about him just because he happened to be asleep.

"Unfortunately, that sort of attack is impossible. I turned back partway up the stairs. That is just how monstrous he is. He makes Garf look cute."

"Garfiel is pretty cute once he gets attached to you…"

"I'm not talking about behavior—I mean their threat level."

That would mean she wasn't denying that he acted cute, but they were in the middle of a serious conversation, so Subaru furrowed his brow without touching on that.

"I'm sure of it. If we don't hold back at all, then he'll just respond in kind. As we discussed, we will have to find a way to satisfy him without making him get serious."

"…You went up to the second floor alone just to confirm that?"

"Don't make me repeat myself. I didn't go up to the second floor. It is too difficult for me as I am now."

Acknowledging a plain and simple lack of strength on her part, Ram was warning him that proper preparations would be vital in order to challenge the second floor. Hearing that they would have to take their time reminded Subaru of the conversation with Echidna and Julius, darkening his expression.

"Barusu?"

"Hmm? Ah, it's nothing… Well, not nothing, but for now it'll have to wait. There'll probably be more to say about it tomorrow, though."

"That's rather cryptic."

"As much as I'd like to say more, it's not my place to talk about it. If I don't at least do that much, there will be no coming back from it."

It was already a fissure that might not be recoverable. He did not want to go hammering the wedge even deeper into it.

Ram did not seem to be convinced by his weak attitude, but she relented.

"Either way, the second floor… Finding a way to get past Reid will take time. At the very least, it would have been better if Shaula had known anything even a bit more useful."

"Well, her not being much help on this is true, but don't take it

too far. If she didn't help us, we both would have been charred ash down under the sand."

Without her, they would not even have reached the examination on the second floor. Thinking about that was enough to make him more willing to cast a kind eye on her sham Sage act.

It would be weirder to clear an exam with the help of the examiner anyway.

"Say all the sweet things you want, but there will come a time when you hit a dead end."

"I don't insist on being perfectly righteous, either. I just take it case by case… This time doesn't cross the line for me yet is all."

"How carefree. Ram can't take such an easygoing stance."

Making her dissatisfaction known, Ram shrugged helplessly. And she slowly turned around.

"Ram should sleep soon, or it will cause issues tomorrow. I'm going back to the carriage."

"Ah, yeah. Um, I…"

It was hard to explain why it was hard for him to go back. While he was struggling to respond, Ram just turned her head and sighed.

"Do as you please. If you hold us back because of your lack of sleep, I'll twist it off."

"Yeah, sorry… Wait, twist off what?!"

"I'll leave that to your imagination."

Waving her hand, Ram walked toward the stairs going down. Not touching on the areas he did not want to deal with and counting on his ability to help himself stand back up was her own way of showing her concern.

Watching her slender back move away, Subaru raised his hand, even knowing she could not see it.

"Good night, Big Sis. See you tomorrow."

"…Ram isn't your big sister. Stop calling me that."

Lately her refusals have been losing strength. Like she's gradually getting to the point where she's just reluctant to admit it.

Saying that, Ram disappeared down the hall, and Subaru cracked his neck.

"Now what to do…"

I can't go back to the carriage. And going to the green room is hard, too. In which case, I need a place where I can either rest until tomorrow or else someplace where I can do something useful.

"If I'm just sleeping, then any room works, but…"

The room where the luggage had been left that had served as both meeting room and dining room would work for option one. The luggage had been set out without too much thought, so he could push some things together to make a bed. It would be a little uncomfortable, but he could accept that as just deserts for what he had done.

As for option two…

"Thinking about how to handle Reid."

Honestly, that would be the most constructive thing. There are a lot of problems right now that would be a lot closer to being resolved if we finish clearing this tower. And I can't say for sure, but it would probably be a big change for the better in the current situation.

Like they had discussed earlier, the plan for dealing with Reid was to find some method of making him genuinely satisfied without him getting serious, a rather vague concept.

At the very least, if we could firm it up a little bit…

"—Right."

As he was thinking that, Subaru snapped his fingers.

A eureka moment struck, and he decided where to go.

"If this works well…"

He could not say for sure, but it definitely had the potential to move things forward by a giant leap.

Getting excited at that thought, Subaru quickly hurried there.

—Subaru's excited footsteps rang out in the tower.

—Just his footsteps.

3

—Waking up was like the moment your head breaks through the surface from underwater.

Pulling your body out of the unconsciousness of dreams, circulating reality around your body by breathing. And slowly consciousness returns, and you break through the surface, being born.

If you wanted to put on airs, you could say that sleep is death, and waking up is birth.

Either way, that poetic feeling aside, as his consciousness gradually awakened…

"—Subaru! Hey, Subaru. Are you okay?"

"Ngh, whoa?!"

When he opened his eyes, Subaru was shocked by the pretty face right in front of him, and he rolled to the side.

The ground disappeared out from under him, and he fell a short way and hit his shoulder.

“Ngh!”

“Wah! Are you all right, Subaru?! Why did you suddenly roll?!”

“I-it’s not like I decided I wanted to just go for a roll…”

Rubbing his shoulder, Subaru shook his head and slowly stood up, and after blinking a few times, he was confused.

He was in a green room.

Inside the room, the overgrown vines covered everything, completely hiding the wall. It was so dense he would have believed someone saying the room had been made with vines.

And apparently, Subaru had ended up in the very center of the room, sleeping on a bed of leaves. And then he had rolled off the bed, ending up in his current situation.

He calmly analyzed it, but there was a reason for that.

“Mm, it looks like you didn’t hit yourself too hard. Thank goodness. But we were really worried, so please don’t scare us like that.”

“Emilia, he won’t reflect on his actions properly if you say it like that. If you aren’t stricter, he won’t understand how worried we were.”

“Right. See, even Beatrice is saying that. She was a mess when we couldn’t find you, and she almost cried when we found you collapsed…”

“Couldn’t you say a little less, I wonder?!”

An exchange out of a comedy sketch unfolded before his eyes.

Nodding along at that adorable back-and-forth, Subaru looked around. As he sat on the ground, there was some sort of massive creature behind him.

“

INTERLUDE

OLD MEMORIES

—A woman. There was a single woman.

The woman was emotional. She was always weeping. Sensitive to pain, she was always crying.

There was one reason why she wept: She could not forgive her own lack of strength.

There was always conflict, fighting, stealing going on all around her.

No matter how many times she called out, no matter how she clung to it, no matter how much she cried or wept, the sadness did not end. So she cursed her fate.

And while cursing fate, cursing and cursing it, she realized something. No matter how much she cried, it was pointless.

And realizing that, what she desired was pure and simple strength.

Strength to overpower others, to mow down everything. She raced forward, wanting to see what level of strength she could achieve by throwing herself at her limits.

What was necessary wasn't simply the strength to hurt others. Not just the strength to take away.

What she sought was a strength so overwhelming that no one could even hope to compare. She believed that would stop the fighting.

The woman who was still crying wanted the strength to be able not to cry.

So long as she was powerless, she could not stop a battle where strength clashed with strength.

Her voice could not reach anyone's ears. Her wish could not be

fulfilled. Her grief would be ignored; her sadness would just fill the sky.

How can they be indifferent? How can they hurt other people? How can they think to go on living like that? How, how, how can they not think there must be another way?

“Children are weeping. The elderly are weeping. Men are weeping. Women are weeping. Everyone is weeping. So why?!!!”

In order to stop that, she wanted plain and simple strength.

She forged herself, attaining a will of steel that could endure any pain.

And finally, the woman reached it. Incomparable power, an overwhelming summit that none could approach.

Standing on the battlefield, she raised her voice and shouted for the battle to stop.

She raced forward to bend strength with strength, to crush all grief with strength, to destroy all malice with strength, to stop her tears.

She pummeled those who held a sword, kicked those who relied on magic, shattered those who bared their fangs, pulverized every last person who sought to fight.

But the more she struggled, the stronger she became, the more swords, magic, and fangs appeared.

It was like a spiral. A spiral of conflict.

No one had an answer for how to live other than by pitting strength against strength.

So no one knew any way other than to win in combat.

“Why?!!!!”

And even as she thought that herself, she also wielded violence.

Lowering her gory fist, covered in the blood of others, the woman looked up at the heavens and wailed in lamentation.

The battle never ended. Her efforts and running were all wasted, and her tears would never stop.

And as she continued to run all around, never-ending despair finally seeped into her breast.

The tears flowed. Overflowed.

Not the hot tears that had poured from her eyes before, but the cold tears of powerlessness and despair.

But at the same time, another feeling swelled inside her.

A rage that stained her heart pitch-black, that made her see the world in a crimson tint, that made her mind go blank.

Even as she wept, she knew the true form of that feeling.

And knowing the name of the emotion, knowing the origin of that emotion, the woman understood.

She had never been weeping out of sadness.

She had always been mad with rage.

The name of that emotion was *anger*—no, *Wrath*.

This world that demanded tears, these people who refused to stop fighting, the absurdity of lives that would always come to an end someday…

I'll punch it all.

At some point, the woman stood up, brushed the mud off her dirty knees, and started running again.

Leaping into the midst of the people who were still continuing to fight, punching their faces and screaming.

Stop fighting. Look at the sky. Listen to the wind. Smell the flowers. Live with your family, your lovers.

Hearing her voice, for the first time, a disturbance ran through the battlefield.

A fist that could split the ground, a kick that whistled through the air, they saved people.

Wounds closed over, screams stopped, knees buckled at the warmth, and battle lost its meaning.

Life returned to normal, and the lamentations disappeared from the battlefield.

The people's tears stopped. The people thanked the woman. Calling out, waving their hands, smiling, but by that time, she was no longer anywhere to be seen.

Naturally.

There were still things she needed to do. She did not have time to look back, she did not have a reason to stop.

She wanted a world where no one cried, where there was no conflict, where nothing was stolen.

Running, running, always running, the woman kept swinging her fists.

Until all the tears stopped, until the hot tears running down her own cheeks stopped.

—The Witch of Wrath ignited her rage at the existence of sadness and continued charging forward.

< END >

AFTERWORD

Hello! It's Tappei Nagatsuki with the mouse-colored cat! No, not *with*, *also*!

Thank you for joining me in the main series's twenty-second volume! I was surprised by how big the number was getting, but it was quite the shock this time as well. There were moments of doubt where I was like, wait, am I writing the twenty-first book or the twenty-second? But wasn't I writing during those months…?

I talked about the numbering for the series in the afterword last book as well, but this time is about how quickly time seems to pass. Light novel series tend to publish at a faster rate than standard literature, and *Re:Zero* is no exception.

Just between us, since *Re:Zero* first came out in January 2014, it has maintained the same publishing pace without slowing down once in that whole time. Twenty-two main series books, and a stunning nine side stories! With thirty-one total books out, it really makes you feel like being a full-fledged author. And if you've bought all thirty-one of those books, then I'm sure you could call yourself a professional reader. Reading thirty plus light novels is really something. Truly, thank you.

Now then, I used that pretext about time passing to mention that *Re:Zero* is still publishing on approximately a three-month schedule, but…I have something I've been looking forward to sharing with all of you.

That's right! Right before the second season of the *Re:Zero -Starting Life Again In Another World-* anime is about to start!

The broadcast has been delayed until July! I am truly sorry to everyone who was looking forward to it! The world is in a bit of turmoil due to a certain loathsome virus.

It is unfortunate that just when it seemed like we would be able to deliver the continuation of the story, after almost four years since the last anime, this had to happen. It is a disappointment for the author as well.

As pro readers like you who have stuck around for this story understand, the second series of the anime covers a very important arc in the *Re:Zero* story (Was there an arc that was unimportant, you ask? Let's skip that question.).

It is a part that we want to be extra sure is done well and that we want to be well-received, so this is a result of the courageous decision by everyone involved with producing the anime. And so, the anime's broadcast has been delayed, but that time will be spent to make it all the better, so please look forward to it!

Leave the bitter disappointment and spoiled, childish complaints to the author.

Grrrrrr! It's not fair. Curse you, virus…!

And while I am still quite angry at the virus, please allow me to turn to the customary thanks.

To my editor I, I'm sorry, as a result of an incredible confluence of events, the manuscript work schedule turned into a real mess this time. While fears were spreading everywhere, it was truly a relief to be able to make the deadline. Thank you.

To the illustrator, Otsuka, I troubled you so much again. Reid is an important character within the *Re:Zero* universe, so it was really gratifying to get such a wonderfully fitting design for him! And thank you for the Pleiades Watchtower design for the cover illustration! I tip my hat to you for creating such a powerful "ancient tower" feeling.

To the designer, Kusano, thank you for the vivid design and working around an illustration with so much information in it. It's amazing how the title doesn't get swallowed up at a glance.

In *Gekkan Comic Alive*, Atori and Aikawa's comicalization of the fourth arc and Nozaki's *Love Ballad of the Sword Devil* are both being published! Thank you as always for the gorgeous and intense developments!

To everyone else at MF Bunko J's editorial department, all the

proofreaders, and all the bookstores, thank you very much for all your work. Let's all get through this together!

And finally, my deepest gratitude to all the readers who continue to support this series.

Unfortunately, I had to share the unfortunate news of the anime's delay, but I would be grateful if you reread the books, rewatched the first anime, checked out *Isekai Quartet*, and just generally got motivated for the new season while we wait out this delay!

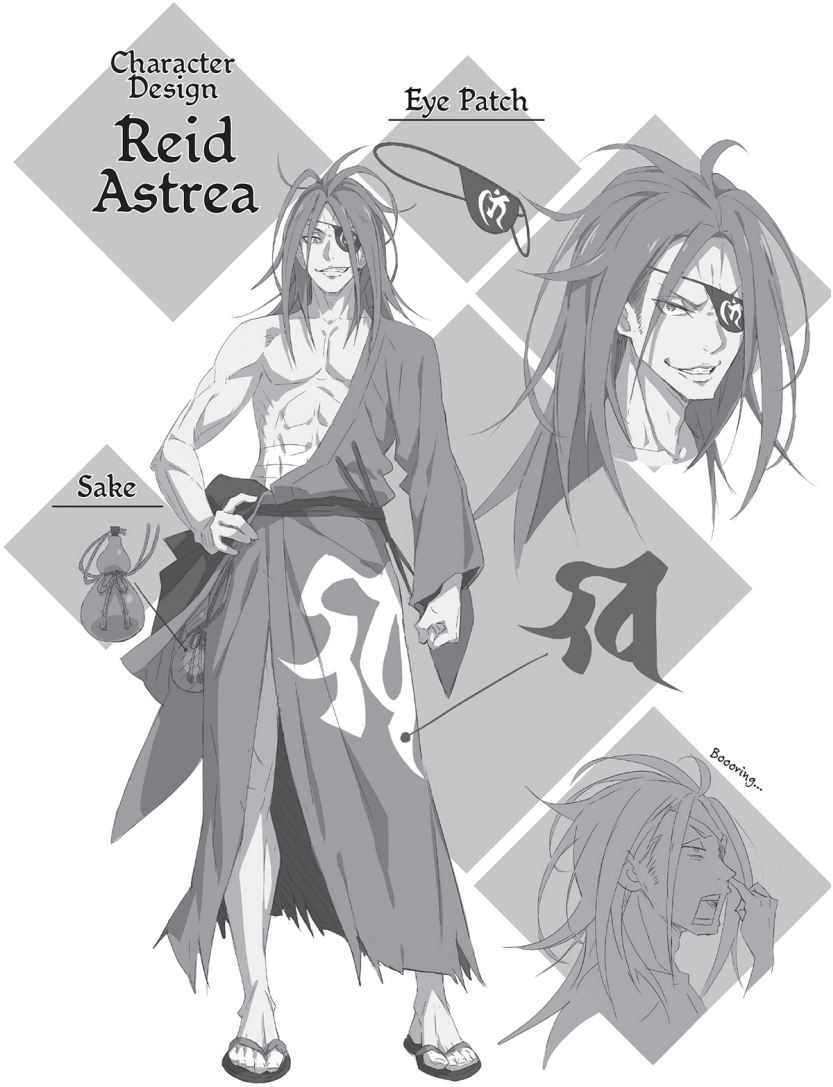
And with that, what does the twenty-third volume hold in store? Stay tuned to find out, and let's meet in the next volume!

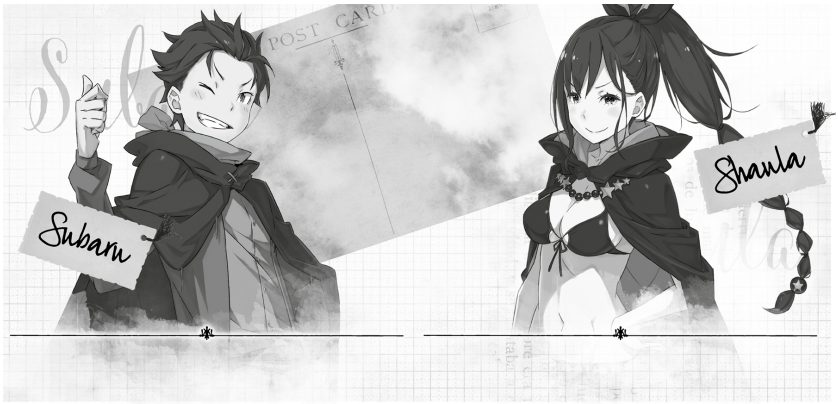
March 2020

<<Face-to-face with a PC, not giving in to the rain or a cold>>

Character Design

Reid Astrea




Subaru
Shaula

And with that, it's time for me and Master to cuddle up!"

"Not happening. This is the announcements section! I'm wrapping up my work, and then I'm out."

"Booo! You're no fun at all, Master! But—but that's just part of your charm! I'm not going to give up! Hey, sexy!"

"No one would call me that even if they were trying to be nice! Whatever, just get this over with already!"

"You don't have to be embarrassed."

"I'm not listening, I'm not listening. And while I'm not listening, the first announcement has to be…"

"*Re:Zero*'s second anime adaptation has been delayed to July!"

"Don't say that so cheerfully! Everyone's disappointed about that, and the author's pretty depressed, too!"

"That doesn't really change the facts, though. That's why I'm going to just get excited for the future. I can't wait for July."

"…Maybe I should take a page out of your book when it comes to positivity…"

"Eh?! Did you just fall for me again, Master?"

"I said nothing of the sort. Next! Huh, a *Re:Zero* mobile game has been announced!"

"Ooooh, finally?! *Re:Zero*'s been showing up in all sorts of places, so I was honestly wondering when we'd get our own game. The world's been waiting for this!"

"That long-awaited game is planned for release in 2020! The details will be announced at a later date, but you'll be able to use Return by Death to explore all sorts of What-If scenarios… Wait, isn't that Hell for me?"

"As expected! There's no man better suited to Hell than you, Master!"

"That doesn't make me feel better! Anyway, Volume 23 of the main series, where I'll experience another new Hell, is planned for June! Also, is it not considered cruel and unusual punishment to make me do the announcement about how I'm going to experience Hell?"

"Honestly, everything about you shines in my eyes, so whatever you say sounds like a proposition to me! And my answer is yes, of course!"

"Then trade places with Emilia-tan now."

"I refuse!"

"Damn! …Also, it's not that I forgot, but the second OVA, *The*

Frozen Bond, that showed in theaters last year is going to be up on Square Enix's Manga UP! starting in the spring."

"The story about that thieving cat and that other cat!"

"You're making it sound like it's all about cats, but it's about Emilia-tan meeting Puck! …And with that, the announcements are done nice and quickly. I feel really tired for some reason, though…"

"Ah, in that case, I'll give you a massage, Master! And then I can lock you in a grapple and carry you back, and we can make it back for cuddle ti—"

"And we're done! I'm gonna go find Emilia-tan and Beako!"

"Awwwww! You're no fun, Master! But that side of you is just my type!"

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